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THE TRACTOR AND THE CORN GODDESS
AND
OTHER STORIES

By the same Author

THE SWORD AND THE SICKLE
ACROSS THE BLACK WATERS
THE VILLAGE

TWO LEAVES AND A BUD

COOLIE

UNTOUCHABLE

THE MACHINE WRECKERS

THE BARBER'S TRADE UNION AND OTHER
STORIES

THE TRACTOR AND THE CORN GODDESS

and

OTHER STORIES

By

M U L K R A J A N A N D

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M. R. A.

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CONTENTS

	<i>Page</i>
THE ROAD	1
THE BRIDEGROOM	9
THE TWO LADY RAMS	14
THE PRODIGAL SON	22
THE THIEF	29
THE MAN WHOSE NAME DID NOT APPEAR IN THE CENSUS	39
LAMENT ON THE DEATH OF A MASTER OF ARTS .	46
APPEARANCE AND REALITY . . .	101
BOOTS	111
PROFESSOR CHEETA	117
THE TRACTOR AND THE CORN-GODDESS . . .	128
LITTLE FLOWER	136
THE LADY AND THE PEDLAR	144
A VILLAGE IDYLL	152
BIRTH	155

The Road

(To Keidrych Rhys and Lynette Roberts)

THE hues of the morning change under the sun like the colours in the kaleidoscope. The delicate sepia of the dawn gives place to tiny pin points of light under the gummed pupils. And, as the eyes open, there are zigzags of fine rays, dazzling and diaphanous. Then the red and amber refulgence of the Sun floods the earth and there is no dark corner in the house where one can rest. Only the grove around the creaking Persian wheels of the well afford some shelter, or the trees which line both sides of the road.

The child knew the changes in the tempo of the morning as vividly as he knew the feel of his mother's body. He could close his eyes and see the alteration of every particle of light almost as though he possessed second sight. And, unknown to his parents, or his brothers, he had evolved a life of his own, a life of adventure under the shades of the grove and on the road. Only one person shared this secret with him and that was the old gardener, who drove the bullocks yoked to the wheel of the well.

And, of course, sharing this secret of the adventurous life together, a great friendship had sprung up between the shrivelled up old gardener and the child. So that the old man would lift the child and put him on his seat on the bracket behind the bullocks, give him his stick to keep the animals aware of their duty and go and mend the ditches of the orchards around the bungalows. And, riding on this roundabout, to the sweet, shrill rhythm of the creaking wheels the child felt as though he was riding a chariot like

the heroes of the Mahabharata which the gardener had told him about.

‘Come, come, my horses, run fast, for we go to battle!’ the child shouted. ‘Faster still because I am Krishna and I have to lead Arjuna into battle. . . .’

The bullocks hurried at the touch of the stick on their haunches. And, because the child’s own name was Krishna, the mimed pose of the legendary charioteer leading the Pandu prince into battle was complete for a moment.

But as the bullocks went round and round and did not seem to get anywhere near the open battlefield, the child felt frustrated, the illusion broke, and he called to the gardener :

‘Ram Din, how far is the battlefield?’

‘You go, you will get there by and by,’ answered Ram Din.

The child goaded the bullocks with little shrill shouts and abuse exactly as he had seen the old man do and he beat the animals hard, his cheeks colouring a vivid pink rose, his large, innocent eyes flashing fire, his little weak chin outstretched, his whole body intent on getting there, into the thick of the fray. And, as the pace of the bullocks quickened, he felt he was getting places and jumped in his seat, eager, impetuous, whizzing past the greenery around, as though the path to battle lay through enchanted gardens. But, as the animals slowed down, and the rhythm of motion dissolved into the slow crawl round and round the crying wheels, the child knew that he was only the namesake of Krishna and not the God he fancied himself to be.

He got off the seat at the end of the shaft and ran towards the gardener with tear dimmed eyes.

The gardener saw the overtones of disappointment on the child’s sagging face and, with a deliberate intent to sustain the illusion, said :

‘ Ah, Lord Krishna, so you have come after all ! And where have you left the chariot ? Oh, there, I can see. I, Arjuna, have sharp eyes. . . . And tell me, pray, is the hour auspicious for battle ? . . . ’

And he began to hack the tall weeds with the sickle in his hand.

‘ No, no, you have to look at the opposing hosts and say : “ I will not fight ” and then I have to give you a discourse on the battle. That is what mother says. . . . ’

‘ Ah, of course, that is right, but I am anxious for battle and must destroy the reeds. We will consider your discourse as given. The battle has begun. . . . ’

And he became busy with his job.

‘ I will not play like that,’ the child said. And, making a wry face, he ran away towards the road. And, seating himself on the charpai of the watchman, dangling his legs to the irrepressible rhythm of his body, he began to intone a nonsensical song without words from his throat, even as he swayed his head to the tune in his mouth. And the whole universe before him became coloured with the aura of this song, as though his eyes had gathered up each nerve and fibre of his being and were looking out like the windows of his soul into the kingdom of gladness that they had made of the world.

The hoopoes which sat on the telegraph pole became the Phoenix. And, already he imagined himself a king, for had not the bird passed right over his head, and hadn’t the gardener told him that if the Phoenix passes over anyone’s head, that person becomes a King. And he immediately stretched his neck upright, adjusted the mukat on his head, as King Vikramadittya was said to do in ancient days, and benignly smiled at the trees and the saplings which were arrayed on both sides of the road. The stick with which he had goaded the bullocks on the well, he tied to the lapel

of his shirt on the left hand side for a sword, and, pinioning an ant which was crawling along under his foot, he hoarsely shouted to his court :

‘ Silence, I proclaim, attention ! . . . Keep quiet while the procession of my subjects passes by ! . . . ’ And, of course, the trees, the birds, the whole breathless morning, duly obeyed.

And lo and behold ! Just at that time a drove of donkeys went cantering along with their empty sacks on their backs and young Rahmat riding on the tallest of their herd behind them, his stick upraised and his foul tongue shouting abuse.

‘ Don’t kick up so much dust ? ’ Krishna shouted imperiously, drawing himself up to his full height in regal rage. ‘ Can’t you see that your monarch is here ? . . . ’

‘ Ohe go, ohe go, go and rest in your mothers’ ! ’ Rahmat shouted. ‘ I am on my way to load my donkeys at the brick factory. I am doing a job of work. ’

And, brandishing his stick with the presumption of a rebel, the master of the herd of donkeys raced away.

‘ Dare he insult the King ! ’ Krishna shouted as he got up and ran after him with sword unsheathed, acting as his own policeman and calling aloud : ‘ Courtier wind, arrest the culprit and put him on the gallows ’

‘ Your orders shall be obeyed, Maharaj, ’ said an old beggar who came bearing his sick son on his shoulders. ‘ Only give a pice. ’

‘ Here’s a pice, old man, ’ said the King, holding himself back from the wild goose chase and putting his hand into his imaginary coffers with the most benign of smiles.

‘ Get away, get away, out of the way, ’ a call disturbed His Majesty from an oncoming tonga.

Half frightened by the perverse rustle of the heavy-voiced carriage driver, Krishna retreated to his charpai. Then, with a ponderous sweep of his vain head, he held his sword

aloft like the Commander-in-Chief at the New Year's march past on the parade, and stood watching erect, his eyes like two balls of fire. And, as the tonga rattled past and left the air filled with a silent dust, and nothing stirred or spoke for a while, His Majesty felt that the procession of his subjects was now passing before him according to plan and with a due sense of respect for his great dignity. And the colours of the morning changed from a dull sun-soaked white to a golden hue and the tense particles of air which had carried the smell of dust in them became redolent of a sense of excitement, the greenery of the trees and garden hedges seemed to be levitating and rising in a rosy glow towards the sky and becoming fixed in the shimmering colours of a thirsty rainbow.

'Give me water to drink,' His Majesty said to Ghulam, the watchman, imperiously.

'Huzoor,' said Ghulam from where he was cutting the leaves of a Neem tree, "I could give you water from the pitcher by the bed, but I am a Muhamnadan and your mother"

'I shall take it myself,' said the child dropping the role of the king. And he helped himself to a tumblerful of water from the cool earthen pitcher, that stood slender-necked under the shade.

'At Kerbala, son,' said Ghulam reflectively, 'on the battlefield of Kerbala, a whole army died of thirst. And there was enacted the tragedy of the martyrdom of Hassan and Hussain'

'When was that, uncle?' the child asked.

'A long, long time ago,' said Ghulam. 'And yet not so long ago'

The child stared open-eyed and open-mouthed at Ghulam the watchman, uncomprehending and yet vaguely aware of the catastrophe that had happened at Kerbala. Perhaps

there was a well, on which was a dispenser of water like the Brahmin at the well on the way to the temple in the Bazar, and he had refused to give water to Hassan and Hussain because they were Muhammadans. And the plain that stretched on the left beyond the Persian wheel well, became a battlefield where flames spluttered, and trumpets sounded, blood flowed and sorrowful cries ended in sighing syllables of choked mouths, and all eyes filled with tears.

The force of the feeling, the intensity of the transfiguration stirred the depths below the child's phantom world and, with an involuntary twisting of his lower lip, he began to weep.

'What is the matter, son?' Ghulam said rushing up to him. 'Have I frightened you? . . . ' And he picked him up and swayed him from side to side to quieten him, even as he sang: 'You mustn't get so frightened, my lion, so easily frightened . . . Come, look, what is there on the road? Ah, there is a man unyoking his bullock cart! And what has he got in his cart? Ah, ears of corn! . . . Come, let us see if he will give us some for you to roast.'

The singsong of Ghulam silenced the child and lifted the burden of centuries off his eyes and demolished the oppressive landscape of sad souls. And the promise of the gift of an ear of corn made the world a fragrant green again. He struggled out of the watchman's hands and ran eagerly to the side of the road where the bullock cart was drawn up.

The enormous wheels of the cart were dusty after the long journey and the oil on the axle had turned a slimy black. He stood by one of the wheels, with the finger of amazement in his mouth. How could such a monolithic wheel have been made? He had thought the same when he had been taken to see the enormous wooden wheels of Maharaja Ranjir Singh's gun, Zam-Zama. And his mother had told him of the wheel of the giant car at Jagannath

THE ROAD

Puri which the gods had made. The carpenters must get very tired making these wheels Or were they made by gods, spirits, demons ?

The child lifted his eyes to the torrid heavens and then to the earth beneath his feet, where began the depths of hell. And he gasped for a moment for fear of both the regions as his mother had told him that the dead men and women go consort with the gods above if they had performed good deeds and to be tortured in the nether world below if they had done evil deeds. And he would have started on his imaginary journeyings if the bullock-cart driver had not come back and called : ' Get away, child, get away, I am going to yoke the beasts to the cart again.'

' Will you let me get on it and drive the cart ? ' the child said.

The eyes of the peasant ogled at him like two wild birds about to fly. And the man struck his tongue against the roof of his mouth to beckon the bullocks towards the harness. As the beasts objected to the imposition, the peasant shouted : ' May you die, bullocks ! Ohe, may your mother die ! ' The child edged away with a shudder.

' Don't be frightened, son, don't be frightened,' the peasant said softly, with a sucking sound of his lips. And then with the same magical phrase he coaxed the bullocks into obedience and harnessed them.

' Now you are going,' the child said, looking up to the peasant from the edge of the road as the man sat on the shaft ready to move on.

' Yes son,' the peasant answered, touched by the naiveté of the baby voice.

' Where are you going ? '

' Oh, on the road ! '

' Where does the road go ? '

' Now you are asking me a difficult question.' And the

peasant scratched his head with a mock perplexity and then said : ' I hear it leads to many strange lands, to Dilli.'

' Kurukshetra—where the Pandus fought the Kurus, as my mother says,' the child babbled knowingly.

' Han, but that was its name in the olden days, son ; now it is called Dilli,' the peasant insisted with solid good sense.

' Does this road also lead to where Raja Rasalu went—the fairy tale forests and the kingdom of monkeys ? '

At this the peasant was taken slightly off his guard. But he at once took the cue and transfigured his speech.

' Han, it leads to the seven cities of the fairies and then across the seven seas to the seven kingdoms of the white monkeys, beyond which, at the end of the antipodes, are the seven cold hells '

' Can I go there with you,' said the child impetuously, impatiently. And he made towards the back of the cart.

' No son, no. I am not going to those worlds,' said the peasant. ' I am only going as far as the market. You will go to all those places when you grow up to be a man.' And he honked the bullocks, dug his stick into their flesh and started off.

' I want to come with you, I want to,' the child cried and he ran dangerously alongside the bullock cart.

Pir Din, the gardener, rushed up and caught him in his arms.

The child kicked and screamed and protested that he wanted to go to the fairy tale forest, to the seven fairy cities and across the seven seas to the seven kingdoms of the white monkeys.

But his protests were of no avail. For the gardener handed him over to his mother who had come out on hearing his cries and stood demurely by the doorway.

The child cried himself to sleep because he could not go

to the secret kingdom that lay at the end of the road. And, when he came to, he burred : ' I shall go to all those places when I grow up to be a man.'

His mother looked askance, but merely said : ' Wander, my son, wander, your legs are of wood and your head is of iron.'

The child merely showed her the ear of corn he had clutched tight in his hands all the while he had been asleep and said : ' Look, mother, what I have got.'

The Bridegroom

(To Mushrif Haq)

MARRIAGE in our country is a very auspicious occasion. Though made and patented in heaven, through the intercession of the priests who can get access to God by way of calendars and horoscopes, it is actually arranged by the holy barber, the official go-between, who interprets the Divine Will and all the high spiritual conceits elaborated by the Brahmins, in terms of the dowry, the shape, size and complexion of the bride and bridegroom, and other such considerations. But the business does not end in the barber's hands by any means. In fact, after the go-between has arranged the match, the whole affair has just about begun. For the doting parents of the bridegroom, and the bride, eager to secure the perpetuation of the race, then take charge and begin all those elaborate processes, the preparation of the trousseau, the sweetening of people's mouths, and arrangements for the actual celebration of marriage

which lasts months and during which the bridegroom's party of friends and relatives travel to the house of the bride and are feasted there for four days and nights with much pomp and ceremony. Somewhere in the course of all this intricate ritual the bridegroom actually sees the face of the bride for the first time, and then they live happily ever afterwards—or so they say, for divorce is unknown in the laws of the Hindus !

The moment when the bridegroom and the bride actually have a vision of their 'fates' is so sudden, and fraught with such immense consequences for their lives, that one can forgive the excess of curiosity they usually feel as the time of union gets nearer.

My friend, Mela Ram, was so excited on the eve of his marriage that he did all kinds of things which normally we would not have expected from so indolent and lethargic a person. Certainly he behaved very strangely during the journey from Gujranwala to Lahore, when the marriage party of a hundred was on its way to the bride's home.

Some five of us, his intimate friends from college, had got into an empty second class carriage, away from the elderly middle-class business men, the family relations and friends of Mela's father, who formed the marriage party and sat in the two compartments booked specially for them. Mela had bought us some whisky to celebrate the marriage in our own particular way, and we wanted to play cards. So we had reserved the second-class compartment all to ourselves by tipping the guard with a drink. We felt rather guilty about bringing Mela with us, away from the vigilant eyes of his father, Lalla Kahan Chand, but the bridegroom seemed to be bursting with happiness and seemed to desire our company anyhow.

At first he stood on the cushioned bunk of the compartment and, turning with a sudden histrionic movement of

his right hand towards his heart, began to recite the 'To be or not to be' speech from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, almost as if he were playing the title role in one of Mr. Sondhi's productions on the stage of the Government College, Lahore. Then, sweating and pale, he produced a copy of Byron's *Don Juan* and read several cantos. We were fascinated by his play-acting for a time, but were not in the mood to hear recitations. So we offered him a drink, withdrawing the offer immediately after, however, because we thought that it would be calamitous if he got drunk or even smelt of whisky by the time he had to ride the white horse at the head of the marriage party procession and be received by his prospective parents-in-law at Lahore. But we were in for it once we had made the offer. For he snatched the bottle out of my hand and put his mouth to it as though he were drinking soda-water.

After this Mela began to tell us some dirty stories. We wanted to play bridge, and tactfully split up into two parties of three and started a game of cut-throat. He insisted on staying in my trio, as I had the whisky bottle in my charge.

For a while we became busy bidding and counter-bidding. I noticed that he was playing safe and did not want to exert himself to take the initiative as he was bidding very low. While he was my partner against Teja Singh, who was playing a no trump with the dummy as partner, I found Mela inattentive. We lost heavily.

At that he seemed to become very disgusted and, again, snatching the whisky bottle from me, swallowed several mouthfuls, spitting some recklessly down his neck. And then he began to sing a folk song. The tune was catchy and we all joined in. Soon we were all clapping hands and stamping our feet and singing at the tops of our voices.

Exhausted, perspiring, and half drunk we wanted to

continue the bridge. But Mela did not want to play any more. So while he retired to the lavatory we all become absorbed in the foursome which Teja Singh and I made with Mukand Lal and Jai Ram, who were both accomplished bridge players.

The game was so absorbing that we did not notice the stations by which the Frontier Mail whirled past. Nor did we bother about the bridegroom after we had heard him orating to himself in the lavatory presumably his whole repertory of speeches and songs. The train pulled up for a minute by Shah-Dara station before crossing the Ravi Bridge because, it seemed, the signals had not been given. But I was losing badly and just then making difficult tricks against my practised adversaries. And, before we knew where we were, the train had steamed into Lahore.

We marked the score on a piece of paper and packed up hurriedly because there was an enormous crowd of hosts, friends and relatives of Mela Ram's prospective parents-in-law waiting on the platform to receive the bridegroom's party. As soon as we poked our heads out of the window a band began to play a martial tune to greet our arrival. At first the host of men and women on the platform rushed towards the special compartments; then, apparently on being told that the bridegroom was with us, they raced up like hungry cattle towards us.

I went and knocked at the lavatory door and called Mela Ram. But there was no answer.

I thought that the bridegroom was probably being sick after all the whisky he had drunk. So I banged at the door with my hands. There was no answer.

I instinctively forced the handle of the door as Teja Singh called back from the window, 'Mela Ram! Mela Ram! Come out, they are waiting for you.'

To my utter amazement the door opened as I tried the handle and I nearly fell in, only controlling myself in time.

‘Mela Ram,’ I called. But it was empty.

‘Where has he gone?’ I whispered in a panic to my companions. ‘Isn’t he in?’ asked Mukand Lal. ‘He is probably shy!’ ‘Or playing a prank on us by hiding in the lavatory,’ said Teja Singh. I said: ‘Go and see.’

They all rushed to the lavatory and returned with horror-stricken eyes and wide-open mouths

‘There is some mistake,’ I said to the waiting crowd to gain time for consultation with my friends. ‘He is probably in one of the other compartments.’ Like sheep they went hurtling back towards the reserved compartments.

‘What could have happened to him?’ we asked each other. And we were afraid that the worst had happened when the train stopped at Shah-Dara by the Ravi Bridge. We were certain Mela had dived into the Ravi in a drunken stupor, though none of us dared say so to each other or anyone else.

As we emerged and explained to Lalla Kahan Chand and the eager crowd of relatives how he had been with us and had then disappeared in the lavatory while we were busy playing cards, the faces of all of them fell and rumour ran through the station that the bridegroom was dead.

The band stopped playing. And, when, after a thorough search had been made of the whole train and telephone messages with the Shah-Dara station had been exchanged without eliciting any information, everyone was convinced that the bridegroom had dived into the Ravi. And the happy, eager hosts put on mournful expressions, while their women, who had only a little while ago been singing songs of joy, began to wail and beat their foreheads and their breasts.

All five of us hung our heads with utter shame, and

the fact that we smelt of whisky and had obviously been responsible for the escapade through which the bridegroom lost his life made us wish that the earth would open up and swallow us. And, while parties were sent out to comb the railway lines and everyone set about doing his share in the search we, outcast for our misconduct, emerged from the station into the compound by the lorry and tonga stand.

As we were deciding to go off in a carriage to the house of a friend, what was our surprise but that the bridegroom, Mela Ram, should come, seated on the front seat of a lorry from the direction of Shah-Dara.

Relieved but angry we rushed towards him, railing at him and shouting our remonstrances.

As he got down from the lorry he simply answered : ' I thought I would get down at Shah-Dara and walk to Lahore, so that I could decide on the way whether I should go in for this marriage at all.'

The Two Lady Rams

(To Maithild Narviasky)

WHEN His Majesty the King Emperor (or whichever Government department it was that acted on His Majesty's behalf) conferred the title of Knighthood on Lalla Jhinda Ram, in recognition of his sundry services to the British Empire, His Majesty's Government did not realise the awful domestic predicament into which they would put him. Of course, there is no way in which His Majesty the

King Emperor, sitting seven thousand miles away from India, can ever get to know anything about the private lives of his subjects. And the department acting in his name which draws up the Birthday or New Year's Honours lists, though it is possessed of fairly well-documented confidential dossiers about the temperament, religious, political and social opinions of almost all notable persons as well as notorieties and, particularly about the services rendered to the Sarkar by them, is singularly inept and formal about the human details of their lives. In the circumstances, the crisis, which the honour of Knighthood precipitated in Lalla Jhinda Ram's house, was as inevitable as a sudden blow from Destiny, and brought more sorrow in its train than the joy which such a rise to eminence and respectability brings with it. For Jhinda Ram had two wives and, naturally, both of them insisted on being called Lady Ram.

Of course, Lalla Jhinda Ram was fairly well able to cope with this crisis in its earlier stages, as he merely ignored the tension between his wives which began to manifest itself in long sulks and occasional snatches of unmentionable dialogue after the news of the award came through. Jhinda Ram was too busy receiving and answering the numerous congratulations which were arriving, and in his furtive colloquies with that part of himself which did not really believe that he, Jhinda Ram, contractor, whose father was a small shopkeeper, had suddenly been lifted from his five foot five of corpulence to an exalted height equal to that of any six foot six Sahib. Apart from the vertical advantages which he had attained, there was the pleasurable feeling of the extension of his personality in girth on the horizontal plane, as it were, through the aura of glory that already radiated from him, as he contemplated himself and smiled to the full-length mirror in stolen sidelong glances when

none of his servants were looking. As his wives had been wrangling for the last seven years, that is to say, ever since the young, twenty-five-year-old Sakuntala came and ousted the fifty-year-old Sukhi, he regarded their renewed bitterness as only another phase of the quarrel which he had dodged by segregating them in two different parts of his house.

But the quarrel took a serious turn as soon as Jhinda realised that, with the news of the award of Knighthood, there was the invitation to attend the Garden Party which was to be held the next day at the residence of His Excellency the Governor, specially for the ceremony of investiture of all those dignitaries who had been granted titles, medals and scrolls of honour.

For, the invitation which came from Government House was for Sir Jhinda and Lady Ram. And as the new Knight only asked his younger wife, Sakuntala, to buy a new sari and get ready for the occasion, the news of this discrimination travelled through the servants to the part of the house where the old wife, Sukhi, was segregated. And there was trouble.

Perhaps, however, trouble is too mild a word for what happened. For it was a veritable war that broke out in the comparatively peaceful house of Sir Jhinda, and trenches were dug, or rather, barricades raised, and if there was no gunpowder used, it was only because women in India have not yet learnt all the tricks of Al Capone as the men have through the talkies.

The bungalow, in which Lalla Jhinda Ram and his two spouses lived, had been specially built before his second marriage, in the now famous Purdah style which has become current in Hindustan. Its front, which looked out into Lawrence Road, was like the front of an ordinary English bungalow, with a verandah decorated by palm trees and

hanging plants, leading through a narrow hall into a large living-room. On either side of this commodious salon, were a suite of bedrooms and boudoirs, bounded by a walled square, which was itself divided by a high wall running right through the middle of the compound.

Until the beginning of the war over the question as to who was to be called Lady Ram and go with Sir Jhinda to the investiture at Government House, both Sukhi and Sakuntala had more or less followed a convention not to interfere with each other but to keep to their different households, attended by servants who all lived a common life in a row of one-roomed houses outside the bungalow. Lalla Jhinda Ram slept alternate nights in the suites of the two wives and spent the few hours during which he was at home in the day time in the English style *gol kamara* or living-room. And life went on smoothly enough, except when these unwritten agreements were violated in any way. Even if there were differences over any undue favour that the lord and master was known, through the gossip of the servants, to be showing to one wife over the other, it was settled through the 'long sulk method' of boycott or through the malicious gossip campaign conducted with the help of partisan servants or relations. And, as both wives enjoyed an equal status under custom, and the rankling bitterness of the old wife was alleviated by the consideration that her husband had only married a second time for the perpetuation of the race since she was barren, life had passed smoothly enough.

But in the crisis which matured before the investiture, a question of principle suddenly arose. For the English, who still allowed the Hindu *Mitakshara* Law to be practised side by side with the Indian Penal Code which they had imposed, and who, therefore, allowed a man to marry three or four wives, had made no ruling whether all or any of

these wives could assume the title of Lady in case the husband was suddenly raised to a Knighthood or Viscounty, or Earldom, Dukedom or anything like that. The question presented itself to Sukhi, the older wife, that if she was not allowed to call herself Lady Jhinda Ram, she, the less-favoured of the two wives, would lose all the prestige that belonged to her as a *mater familias*, and that she would be as good as thrown on the rubbish-heap in full view of that chit of a girl, Sakuntala, who had so far regarded her as a kind of mother-in-law and been fairly respectful to her.

So, early in the morning, after she heard that Sakuntala alone had been asked by the master of the house to go to the Garden Party at Government House, Sukhi outflanked the wall that divided the suite of rooms from her young rival's and walked straight through the English-style living-room and opened her attack.

'Eater of her masters, this is the last humiliation which you had to cast on me!' she began. 'But I'll pull every hair on your head and blacken your face!!!'

Sir Jhinda and Lady Sakuntala Ram had hardly yet awakened from their deep slumber. On hearing this violent language, they scrambled out of bed, lest Sukhi should really mishandle them.

'Go to your rooms,' Sir Jhinda said peremptorily, rubbing his eyes.

'I will stay here if I like,' said the loud Sukhi. 'I am the owner of the whole of this house. You had nothing before I brought a lakh of rupees in my dowry! . . . What did this bitch bring with her—nothing but a fair complexion and a snub nose.'

'Go, go, gentle woman!' protested Sakuntala meekly. 'Go to your own part of the house and don't eat my life.'

Whereupon Sukhi let loose a flood of curses, imprecations and innuendoes and silenced them both.

Unable to bear the continued flow of her abuse Sir Jhinda ultimately had to resort to *force majeure*. Like a knight of old he summoned the true sense of chivalry towards his young love and, taking Sukhi by the hair, tried to drag her away to her part of the house. Strangely enough the old woman did not respect her lord and master any more, for she resisted like a tiger and, upturning the table in the living-room, barricaded herself there and waxed eloquent about the misdeeds of Sir Jhinda and Lady Ram all day.

Sir Jhinda was sufficiently perturbed by her stand to go and telephone the A.D.C. to His Excellency the Governor to ask for an appointment to see him on an urgent matter.

The A.D.C., who was busy with arrangements for the Garden Party next day, stalled, presuming that Sir Jhinda Ram was only after some deal or contract as usual, and though the commissions the Sahib had received from this knight had always been generous, Captain Forbes had made his pile and did not want to get involved in these shady negotiations any more.

But as the battle between his two wives was still raging at noon, when Sir Jhinda returned home for the midday meal, the knight was very distressed and thought of a typically Indian and very unorthodox manner of approach to the whole question. Always, in time of trouble in the old days any man could go right up to the king, Sir Jhinda knew; so he would go and see the Governor of the province, the king's representative, the shadow of the monarch.

He had, however, reckoned without his hosts. For, as he drew up to the gates of Government House, the sepoy on sentry wanted to see his pass. And no lies that Sir Jhinda could concoct about his being the contractor, who had to superintend the supply of cutlery for the Garden Party, would satisfy the soldier of the king.

'The Garden Party is in the afternoon,' the sepoy said.

‘Lat Sahib is at tiffin. And there are strict orders that no one should disturb his siesta.’

Sir Jhinda, humiliated before his chauffeur, got into his car and returned homewards. On the way, he exercised all his wits to discover some way to solve the infernal crisis in which he found himself. But howsoever he looked at the problem, he knew a few things were certain : (1) that Sukhi would never let him rest all his life if she was not called Lady Ram and taken to the Garden Party ; (2) that Sakuntala would never let him come near her if, after having told her to prepare for the Garden Party, he now withheld this pleasure from her ; (3) that there was no way of contacting the Governor or A.D.C., and that it was no use seeking advice of any of the gentry in the town, because they would be malicious and make a joke of what was a question of life and death for him.

‘Forgive me, Lallaji,’ said the chauffeur, turning round as Jhinda Ram got out of the car in the drive of his bungalow, ‘forgive me for being so officious as to make a humble suggestion’

‘What do you know of all this ?’ said Sir Jhinda Ram, angry but humble, for he knew his servants knew all about his predicament. ‘Speak, what have you to say ?’

‘Maharaj, forgive me who is not good enough to clean the dust of your shoes. . . . But why don’t you take both the Bibis to the party ?’

‘Acha, mind your business,’ said Sir Jhinda Ram gruffly, and dismissed the driver.

But in his heart of hearts he thought how obvious and simple a solution to the whole problem this was. Why, if he could marry two wives in law, he certainly ought to have a right to call them both Lady Rams. There was no precedent for this, but he would create the precedent. And, anyhow, the Governor could not turn one of his wives out

if he took them both to the party. The only difficulty was the invitation card, which was only for Sir Jhinda and Lady Ram. . . . But that was easy. He would alter the words to 'The two Lady Rams,' as he had altered many more intricate documents in the past.

'Ohe,' he called to the chauffeur, 'Go and tell both the Bibis to get ready for the Garden Party. And get my bearer to serve my tiffin.'

With that quality of tact which the driver had displayed to Sir Jhinda, he respectfully approached both the wives and told each of them separately that she alone of the two wives was going to the garden party. Sakuntala had already been confident about her husband's choice, but Sukhi's vanity was tickled by the special emphasis that the chauffeur laid on the Master's ultimate choice of her. This appeased her wrath for the while, so that she began to prepare for the occasion.

The duplicity of the driver afforded Sir Jhinda enough time to eat his midday meal in peace and even to have his siesta, a bath and a change of clothes. And when the two wives appeared, both dressed in the most flashing saris and found they had been tricked, they dared not, out of respect for their prolonged toilet, gouge each other's eyes out. Besides, the clever driver took charge of them and Sir Jhinda, bundled them into the car and sped towards Government House.

The sentries at the gates of the holy of holies presented arms to the honoured guests as the car slid into the drive.

And, apart from the lifted eyebrows of the butler as he sonorously announced 'Sir Jhinda and the two Lady Rams' to His Excellency and Her Excellency, who stood receiving the guests at the head of a marquee, nothing untoward happened. As a matter of fact, Her Excellency made it a point to compliment the two Lady Rams on their wonderful

saris, and His Excellency was cordiality itself when he presented the Star of the Knight Commander of the Indian Empire to Sir Jhinda Ram.

There were a few young boys and girls who chuckled as they furtively whispered to each other 'Look there!—the two Lady Rams!' But then the youth of to-day, in Government House and outside, is notorious for its complete disregard of all manners, codes, conventions, rules and regulations. And such disrespect was only to be expected.

Since that day Sir Jhinda and the two Lady Rams are a familiar feature of all ceremonial occasions in our capital. And no Empire Day, cricket match or horse race is complete without them. For they are three staunch pillars of the Raj which has conceded to them privileges unknown in the annals of the Angrezi Sarkar of India.

The Prodigal Son

(To Arnold Rattenbury)

'MAY I be his sacrifice, he is safe,' said old Gobindi talking more to herself than to Ganesh Das, the moneylender and grocer who lay sprawled across the platform of his shop in the hot afternoon, fanning himself with a broken palm-leaf fan. 'Sethji, he is all right, my ruby. Such a good boy. . . .'

'Ohe go, go, old woman, I don't know what you are talking about,' the moneylender answered surlily. 'Go and let me rest.'

'I have had a letter from him—two letters! May I be

his sacrifice. I knew he would write to me. Sethji, how shall I tell you ? . . . He was such a good boy, my Sher Singh. Always considerate and respectful.'

'Respectful, did you say ? That son of an owl, who always used to tease his elders ! The scoundrel ! Budmash of number ten ! . . . A thief into the bargain ! And a perverter of youth—he utterly ruined my son Trilok Chand with his bad influence !'

As these harsh words rose on his tongue and charged his somnolent frame with a fiery rage, Seth Ganesh Das got up and lifted the broken palm leaf hand-fan threateningly in his hand.

But the old woman remained unperturbed by all this sound and fury, regarding it as part of the moneylender's familiar temperament, due either to the fact that he ate too many chillies or was constipated through lack of exercise. She held the two letters from her son, Sher Singh, firmly in the grip of her gnarled right hand and muttered to herself, so that the wrinkles of her hoary, old face were smoothed out by a smile.

'May I be his sacrifice, he is no dog, even though I may at one time have been a bitch ; he was born of a legal father, my Sher, my ruby ; his father was a Sikh Surma who fought and died in the war when you sat here farting and making money. . . . Now, don't whine like a black wasp, but tell me where your son, Trilok Chand is, so that I can have these messages read. For he may be wanting me to send him some sugar plums or something, my ruby.'

'Oh go and look after your sugar plums and don't pester me,' said Seth Ganesh Das. And then he phewed a stale breath, frowned and fanned his padded face, which was covered with perspiration. 'Trilok Chand has gone to Dhariwal for the day . . . Go, now, you know I can't read Angrezi !'

‘But just look at the letters,’ the old woman persisted. ‘And try and figure out a few words for me. I shall willingly pay you for your trouble, we poor always hear by paying while you Sahukars hear by magic.’

‘It is not magic that speaks from that box, it is a radio, and I paid five hundred rupees for it, worse luck. It’s that boy Trilok Chand’s toy which has cost me so dear. And now I can’t get any peace at all. The swarms of idlers are sitting round day and night listening to its cain cain My life has become illegal!’

‘Let the boys have their fun, bless them,’ said the old woman. ‘Your Trilok is a nice, well-spoken boy. But my Shera, though boisterous, was always good hearted, giving away whatever he had People were not patient with him, Seth Ganesh Das, and resented his mischief unfairly. I knew that really he is very gentle. He said to me on his last leave: “Mother, you look like an old witch; here, take twenty rupees and go and get yourself a new silk shirt.” And though he smokes cigarettes and has an eye for the girls, he is a good lad at heart when he is’

‘Oh show me the letters,’ said Seth Ganesh Das anxious to get rid of her. ‘You yourself used to complain that he was thieving you of your savings, and now you talk of him as though he were an angel. The vicious devil! I hope the war has cured him of the criminal tendencies he inherited from his father, the drunkard and whoremonger! . . . Come, give me the letters.’

The old woman, who would not have strained herself to be polite to the crooked moneylender, got up excitedly at his offer to read the letters and, handing him the envelopes, stood away with abject humility.

‘That one I can’t read at all,’ said Ganesh Das looking at the large brown envelope with **ON HIS MAJESTY’S**

SERVICE printed on it. And, thrusting it back at Gobindi, he opened the airgraph in the small brown envelope, and began to read it, interspersing his own comments as he did so :

“ Sender’s Address : Havildar Sher Singh.” Fancy, the son of a swine, he has become a Holdar now. There will be no holding him when he comes back, the horse of a Holdar ! ’

‘ Don’t be frightened of him, Ganesh Das,’ the old woman assured the moneylender, ‘ He is really a gentle boy for all his frolics. . . . Has he risen in rank, then ? ’

‘ Yes, Holdar, he is a Holdar now ! Fancy ! ’

‘ May I be his sacrifice and what does he say ? ’

Ganesh Das read on :

“ After Sat Sri Akal and touching your feet, mother, I have to say that I have been moved from where I was to a new place. We came here by a ship. I was not sea-sick this time as I was on the journey out from Hindustan. Arriving here, we had to move by road up north. Our lorries got stuck in the mud and the snow. But finally we succeeded in travelling to the front. Pity I did not bring the amulet for my safety that you had had written by Mahant Sampurun Singh—it might have kept me warm with its bit of lion’s skin ! . . . ”

‘ He is a clown, the boy ! ’ the old woman said. ‘ But perhaps I can send him the amulet for his safety.’

‘ If you want to hear, then hear, otherwise go away,’ barked Ganesh Das.

‘ Acha, proceed, brother,’ Gobindi said. ‘ May I be your sacrifice.’

“ There is no news from you. Ask my friend Trilok Chand to write a letter for you any time you feel like it. Unlike his father . . . ”

Ganesh Das stopped and, livid with rage, he threw the airgraph towards the old woman, shouting :

‘The son of the devil ! Illegally begotten ! So this is the way he has been encouraging my son to despise me ! The hooligan !’

Gobindi picked up the little glossy sepia leaf and, laughing a wheezy laugh, said :

‘Vay, don’t be so touchy. It would seem as if you had seen a cat’s face early this morning, you are so sore. . . . My Sher Singh is a jolly boy, full of fun. He doesn’t mean any harm. He used to make fun of me too, but I did not mind. After all, we older people should know that it is the day of the young ones now. And he was such a devoted son. He always returned home after his various escapades. And just before going away, when I asked him whether I should arrange the match of the daughter of Shiv Singh of Taran Taran for him, he said, “Mother, but what about you : I have no need of a wife while you are alive. . . .”’

‘The lecher !’ said Ganesh Das, red in the face. ‘Of course, he didn’t need a real wife, frequenting the houses of prostitutes as he did, spoiling my son into the bargain. . . . He could always come back to you for comfort. And . . . I have never heard you say a good word for him before. But you seem to have gone mad to-day, the way you are extolling his angelic qualities ! . . . Go away now, go and let me have my siesta. . . . Go, or I shall drag you away by the hair !’

‘May I be his sacrifice,’ the old woman said. And she held the two letters in her trembling hands, her heart jumping with the pull of curiosity, even as it was disturbed by the viciousness in the tone of the moneylender.

‘May I be his sacrifice,’ she repeated and started to move away, exploring among the shades of the cluster of trees at

the cross roads for someone who could decipher the messages from her son, specially the one in English.

‘Funny boy,’ she muttered to herself. ‘A real show off writing to me in Angrezi as though I was a Mem Sahib ! But he was always for learning git mit, git mit and romanced about how he might bring a Mem home for a wife.’

As she began to walk, she could see that all the leisurely rich and literate folk of the village, the landlord, the son of the Tehsildar, as well as the younger brother of the priest who was said to be ‘Entrance pass,’ were having their siesta under the trees. So she turned towards the shop of Hemu, the confectioner. But before she had advanced a step, she could see no one there except the lean mongrel ‘Phida,’ who was licking a cauldron by the doorway. She turned in the opposite direction and proceeded towards the temple, thinking there may be someone in the shade of the shrine who could read Angrezi.

‘May I be a sacrifice for him,’ she muttered.

‘Who are you talking to, mad woman ?’ called Arur Singh, the cloth dealer. ‘Go and rest at home. The sun is very hot. You will’

‘Vay son, he is an angel, my Sher Singh, my ruby. And he has sent me two letters which I want someone to read to me.’

‘There is Babu Trilok Chand coming there—the friend of your Sher Singh,’ the cloth dealer said significantly. ‘He can read all the signs and secret codes invented by your son to hide his misdeeds.’

Old Gobindi turned to look back and saw Trilok Chand, the son of the moneylender, and burst out :

‘May I be a sacrifice for you . . . He has written, actually written ! Two letters instead of one. “He won’t rain, he will come like a storm.” One is in Hindustani, which your father has read to me ; and the other is in

Angrezi. God bless you, son, read it for me . . . He is your friend, after all . . . Do you remember how you used to be inseparables? You knew him better than anyone, son. And whatever the others may say, you know he was an angel’

‘Give me the letters, mother,’ Trilok Chand said, wiping the sweat off his forehead as he bent over the old woman. ‘Let us see what the “angel” says.’

‘Your father has all but read the one in Hindustani son,’ Gobindi said. And she handed him the big Sarkari envelope first and stood looking up at him, her right hand supporting her feeble back, while the forefinger of her left hand supported her chin with a child-like innocence.

Trilok Chand tore open the envelope and spread the thick official paper before his eyes which were screwed up against the glare of the sun. As he read, his eyes opened wide and he moved his head from side to side as he scanned the note. Then he spoke :

‘Whether he ever was an “angel” or not he has become an angel now.’

‘You mean he . . . ?’ said Arur Singh, the cloth dealer.

Trilok Chand nodded his head.

‘But, son, look at this,’ said old Gobindi, her hands trembling and her face colouring suddenly with a ghastly pallor.

Trilok Chand took the airgraph and compared the dates : the private letter had been written five months before the date of the official note.

‘Sher Singh has ascended the celestial heavens,’ he said in a half suppressed whisper.

‘May I be. . . .’

But the old woman could not complete her phrase and her mouth remained open, until an uncanny shriek of horror rose from her diaphragm and ended in a moan.

‘O what curse against my love has prospered in your death, my son!’ she cried. ‘O, what evil deeds did you do to cause your death!’

The pallor on her face had evaporated; instead, the withered root of her visage burnt like red hot cinders, even as it secreted tears; while the dead air blistered her neck with the fury of the angry sun.

The leisurely folk, who were enjoying their siesta, awoke and rushed towards her, while she fell to beating her breasts, her forehead, her cheeks and her thighs, even as she intoned the dirge:

‘Hai Hai Shera
Hai Hai! . . .’

The Thief

(To Ahmed Abbas and Krishan Chander)

THE ‘hoom’ of the summer months in India is inexplicable, except in terms of an airlessness which seems to dissolve everything about one slowly and surely into a vague nothingness. Perhaps only a graph could illustrate it, because it is as much a sound effect as sense data, and sound can be drawn. Or, may be, one could dispose certain daubs of paint in such a way as to break the exact symbolism of the Wheel of Life in a Tibetan scroll, and show all the concrete objects falling away, crumbling like the edges of the earth on judgment day, the stars breaking, the comets shaking, the seas full of fire and the Sun alone standing there on high, a magnificent orb of brightness;

a cruel, blood-sucking demon, scorching all sentient things as in some prehistoric war of the elements . . .

Ganesh always felt the listlessness of half death when he got up in the mornings, the heavy lids on his eyes literally ached as they opened, and no amount of stretching would stir the cells of his body into a sense of more than the doubt that he existed. So he generally crawled out of bed and proceeded towards the small balcony on the first floor of his ancestral mansion, there to inhale deep breaths of any air that was going. But there was seldom even a movement of a leaf or a dust speck such as could be called a breeze. Only the 'hoom' mixed here with certain asafoetid smells which rose from the open drains of damp lanes, the smoke of centuries and the rubbish of days that ran like a sore out of the huge bin on the corner of Gupta Road (named after his family) and King George's Road (named after George V, 'the Sailor King,' who stood enshrined in marble fifty yards away in his coronation robes).

Although the 'hoom' persisted and there was no fresh air to breathe, there was a good reason why Ganesh Prashad repaired to the balcony with such unfailing regularity. For, since the scarcity in the South, the town's population had swelled with beggars, and among these was a woman with a child who had taken shelter on the marble steps at the foot of old King George's statue.

The slippery pads of her buttocks swayed before his gaze in zig-zags, as she walked away from the rubbish bin to the steps of the statue, after collecting a crust or a raw vegetable peel to chew. And as she drifted about like this, Ganesh felt a yearning in his blood, and his breath came and went quickly, until he was nearly choked in the utter hush of the mornings with the heat produced by the maddening waves of desire. His aching eyelids ached more sharply in

the blinding glare and yet he could not keep his eyes from groping across the blaze, among the group of people who clustered round the steps of the statue or the rubbish bin, for the form with the swaying hips.

The fascination had been overwhelming from the start, for the first impression of the triangle formed by her thighs had made his sensations swirl in a giddy wave. But the memory of this impact had been sucked in by the sagging nerves of his sleep-doped body, and had gradually become a vague reaction with which other elements had mingled.

For instance, he had felt a distinct wave of nausea cum pity when he had seen her pick up a rotten banana peel from the rubbish bin and lick it. And he had wanted to run down and tell her that she would get cholera if she ate anything out of that bin. But he was afraid that if he went and singled her out for sympathy the other beggars might notice him and beat him up, for they still seemed to have enough strength left to guard the honour of their women-folk vigilantly. And as he could not do much about it he had just stood and stared at her, with the dull thud of an ache at the back of his head.

On another day, Ganesh had seen the beggar woman feeding her child on a bared breast. And that had aroused a feeling of unbearable tenderness in him, a tenderness, however, which gnawed at his vitals and aroused a lust of which the nether point was fixed somewhere in the memories of his own childhood.

And later, all these feelings had mixed with yet another—with a disgust he had suddenly felt on imagining her unwashed, dishevelled body in his arms, the putrid sore of her mouth touching his, the mouth which had eaten dirt and the filth of the rubbish bin, which had drunk the scum of the drains.

And yet, in spite of all the contradictory feelings, the

first fascination of her swaying buttocks lasted, and the irresistible feeling which spread the confusion of a cloud over his senses, so that time and space ceased to exist and no consideration of duty or shame baulked his drunken gaze. And under the impulse of this distended desire, he would stand fixed to the balcony the whole morning though he be late for the office, until his elder brother, with whom he worked in the family firm of solicitors, began to notice the waywardness of his behaviour.

Once, he had tried to work up enough audacity to attract the woman's attention. But, being a timid respectable creature, he had to summon all the crazy impulses in his being to exercise the demons of destruction in him and beckon them to help him. The whole thing was a joke, he had sought to tell himself, the whole world was a joke and nothing was really stable. He himself, inheriting half the wealth of his dead father, was yet a slave to all the inhibitions and prohibitions of his elder brother and sister-in-law, living a confined, conventional life, contrary to everything he had learnt at college, and in full view of the disintegration, death and disease about him. And if it was all a joke, then this woman was a leer, an abject, worthless nothing, an ignorant, illiterate and dumb creature except that she possessed a pair of hips like boulders, the swaying of which excited him and from which he might get the pleasure of a moment, a mere particle of time in the long æons of eternity where nothing counted or mattered. But, though the need for hypocrisy and circumlocation to build up an argument resulted in the coining of a number of euphemisms, he could not get away from the basic human feelings of pity and tenderness.

For, every day he was reminded of the incident in his youth when he had accused a beggar, who used to come up the lane on the right hand side of this house, of stealing a

silk dhoti from his study on the ground floor, and had stood by while the servants beat up the beggar. In his younger days he had willed himself into the belief that he had actually seen the beggar rush out of his room with the dhoti, but since then he had felt less and less sure about it, and was, in fact, convinced that he had been guilty of snobbery with violence against an innocent man. And now, this hangover of an unkind act against one beggar had become an undertone beneath the lust for another, and the mingling of these made for a restlessness which was obvious in the increasingly frequent nervous twitch of his neck.

As he stood there one day, he felt he could not bear it. He could see the woman's breasts undraped, where her sari had slipped off as she crouched by the statue and washed the grit out of her child's eyes. And he felt the rustling of a strange song in his ears, the loam-song of dizzy desire mounting to the crescendo of a titanic choir. And the flow of a passionate warmth spread from his loins upwards to his eyes, making them more heavy-lidded and soporific than they had been when he had just awakened.

For long moments he tried to check his instinct to look deeper, to caress the amplitude of her haunches, an instinct which was driving him crazy. But he could feel her presence inflaming his body like a slow forest fire, which comes creeping up from the roots like smoke but becomes a wild red blaze suddenly in one crucial moment.

And as he was choked with desire, his neck twitched like that of a snake in the burning forest, and his vision was clouded altogether. Breathing heavily, hot, suffocated, he lifted his elbows from the wooden railings on which they rested and tried to steady himself.

The woman had now picked up her child and was feeding him at her right breast as she sat cross-legged on the

ground. But the little one was whining, and shrieking, partly from the pain he had felt at having the thick crusts of grit removed from his eyes, but mainly because there was hardly any milk in his mother's breasts.

Ganesh's passion seemed to congeal as he heard the cries; he could feel an almost tangible loosening of his flesh, and though he was still soporific he realised that he must go and bathe and dress.

But, even as he was withdrawing his gaze after a furtive stare at her haunches, he saw her hit the child with the palm of her hand and thrust the nipple of her left breast into the mouth of her son. As Ganesh lingered to see what her second breast looked like, he heard the child yelling continuously. And, now, as though it were a revelation, the fact dawned upon him that there was no milk in the woman's breasts, and that her child, who gnawed at her like a hungry rat, was shrieking with the need of his young life for sustenance.

He stood tense, as though he had had a vision, and his head was bent with a humility such as he had never known before, a craven, abject feeling of shame that a mother should have to hit her child in his presence because she had no milk in her breasts to give him, that she should have no milk because probably she had had no food herself. The joke, if it was a joke, the leer of her mouth, as well as the general ridiculousness of the world, was far too grim a joke to be merely laughed at. And, though she was unknown to him, an utter stranger, here to-day and dead to-morrow, she concerned him, if only because he had allied himself in his mind with desire for her. . . .

As soon as the passion had become compassion in his body he had decided upon a course of action.

He turned round with a face knotted as though with revulsion against himself, and rushed downstairs towards

the kitchen. It was just possible that by some miracle his sister-in-law might still be having her bath or lingering over her prayers. If so, he could get to the storeroom and get out a bag of grain and give it to the woman and her family on the steps of the statue.

When he got to the kitchen, he found that the course was, indeed, clear. There was only Biju, the servant boy, peeling vegetables there. But the storeroom was locked and the keys, ostensibly, hung at one end of his sister-in-law's sari.

'Where is Bibiji?' he asked the servant impetuously.

'She is having a bath,' Biju said.

Ganesh swayed histrionically as though to yawn and stretch in order to bluff the boy. Then he drifted away up the stairs towards the bedroom occupied by his brother and sister-in-law. His brother would be away on his morning's constitutional in the garden, and, with luck, his sister-in-law had undressed in the bedroom and left her bunch of keys there.

With beating heart and anxious face, he sneaked into his brother's bedroom and looked around. He was lucky. The bunch of keys was on the dressing table. He took it.

But, before rushing down with it, as the wild cries of the beggar woman's child were terrorising him to do, he sought to cover his manoeuvre and to give himself time. He went towards his room and called out:

'Will you be long in the bathroom, sister-in-law?' He knew that she would be longer out of sheer cussedness if only he showed any anxiety to make use of the bathroom.

'Yes, I am washing my hair,' came the answer.

Ganesh's face coloured with glee at the success of his ruse. The only thing that remained was to get the servant boy out of the way. So he called out from the inner balcony:

‘Biju, go and get me a packet of razor blades from the shop . . . Here’s a rupee coming down.’

The servant boy knew that he could always keep any change that was left over from a rupee when Ganesh Sahib sent him shopping. He came eagerly enough into the compound and, picking up the money, ran.

Ganesh went down quickly and opened the lock of the storeroom door. He felt he heard a chorus of accusing voices and paused for a moment, but realised that it was only his heart pounding against his chest. And though he could not remember the shrill cries of the beggar woman’s child any more, he remembered the way the little rat nibbled at his mother’s breasts. For a moment he felt a fool going into the storeroom, a place where he had seldom entered. But then he plunged into the dark.

His brother had hoarded quite a few bags of wheat and rice. So it was not difficult to spot them. Only, he didn’t know whether it would be a bag of wheat or rice that he would be taking away. He did not pause to deliberate any more, however. He merely strained to get a grip on the nearest bag.

After rubbing his hands, which were moist with perspiration, on his pyjamas, he caught hold of the bag and lifted it coolie-wise on his back. Then he scrambled out and made for a small alley on the side of the house.

Hardly had he got to the middle of the passage way when he met Biju, who had come back after buying the razor blades.

‘Let me carry it, Babuji, let me carry it,’ the boy said.

Ganesh was in a panic.

‘Get away, get away,’ he said.

But as the boy persisted, he thought that he might as well give the load to Biju, as, at any rate, he himself wouldn’t

look too dignified crossing the stretch between the opening of the gully and the crowd of beggars by the statue.

‘Where shall I take it?’ Biju said.

‘Give it to the beggars out there,’ Ganesh said.

The servant boy looked askance but obeyed the orders.

Ganesh returned towards the storeroom to lock it up and restore the keys to his sister-in-law’s dressing table.

‘Where are my keys?’ he heard a voice. But he thought that it was his own bad conscience shouting as it had done before.

‘Who has taken the keys? Biju? Where are you? Have you taken my keys?’

Ganesh could not now mistake the source of the voice.

He drifted away from the storeroom door and ambling along as though he had come from a leisurely session in the lavatory below, he said:

‘The storeroom is open. Your keys are lying here. Of course, the servant must have taken them . . .’

His heart beat like a tom tom in hell now that he had lied. And he cursed himself for his lack of self-control.

The sister-in-law returned to her room, thinking that the servant had, indeed, taken the keys to get some condiments out of the storeroom.

Ganesh waited for Biju to come back, so that he could conspire with the servant boy to cover up what he had done.

‘Don’t tell Bibiji about the bag of grain’ he said when the boy returned. ‘And where are the blades?’

Biju showed him both the blades and the change on the palm of his hands.

‘Keep the change,’ Ganesh said. And he proceeded upstairs.

Like all people who try to be clever and hatch plots to carry out a design, he forgot to do one or two things which were essential to bluff his sister-in-law. For instance,

he did not tell the servant boy the details of his plan about the bag of grain. Nor did he ask him to pretend that he, Biju, had taken the keys from the mistress's table to open the storeroom door and get some condiments out. And when his sister-in-law arrived downstairs and asked for the keys, the servant boy innocently said he knew nothing about them.

Of course, on sensing the real nature of the situation, he began to invent a lie to the effect that he had taken the keys from Ganeshji to fetch an empty bag out.

The lady of the house was nothing if not a shrewd, knowing housewife, instinctively aware of the subterfuges, lies and innuendos of all the members of the household. She caught the servant boy in the trap of prevarications that he had begun to make. And, when, on top of the incriminating evidence which Biju gave against himself, Ganesh said he had seen him carry a bag of grain out of the house, the lady got her husband to beat the servant boy and throw him out, so that he could be free to join the beggars outside, whom he loved so dearly. In spite of the many more lies he told, the servant boy was, however, throughout, as stubborn in refusing to tell upon Ganesh as this gentleman was in concealing the truth which might have cleared up the matter.

The imperturbable calm of Ganesh's behaviour after this incident was only broken when he saw the beggar woman again the next morning. His neck twitched more furiously, and his heavy-lidded eyes blinked, as if someone were digging pins into them, especially because he saw the servant boy, Biju, seated by her almost as though he had taken complete charge of her.

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The Man Whose Name Did Not Appear in the Census

(To S. A. Dange)

THE thumping on the door was so peremptory that Ramji stopped blowing at the coals in the chulun of his hookah and waited open-mouthed for the worst to happen.

But nothing happened. Only, there was more thumping on the door. And Ramji just could not put his mouth to the base of the cocoanut hookah, which he held in his left hand. He merely stared into nothingness and cocked his ears to listen intently.

There was more knocking.

Ramji's wife, Luxmi, said : ' Why don't you get up and open the door ! '

The words seemed to fall on deaf ears, for Ramji's ears were full, not only of the scum which usually gathered in them so thickly for months until the ear-cleaning barber came to the village, but also of the sound of various kinds of knocks on the door he had heard and learnt to distinguish. He remembered, for instance, the gentle tapping on the door when his father-in-law came, quite unlike this heavy thumping now. Then, the dangling of the latch chain by his wife's impetuous female friends basically different from this thumping and more like the knocking of the key on the frame of the drum which the women practised on marriages and betrothals in the village. Again, there was the knocking on the threshold of the house by Moti, the family cow, when she came back from pasture. No, this thumping was unlike any of these usual knocks on the door. It was

like another kind of sound which Ramji had heard, a knell which sounded every quarter when one of the landlord's henchmen, or the policia came to call him, which had driven the fear of the stave and the shoe into his bones, and which had rendered him dumb and helpless till he was prostrate at the remotest echo of it.

The thumping became impatient, angry and loud and it was accompanied by an abusive, gong-like voice calling, 'Ohe khol, ohe khol—open the door !'

Ramji sat there on the charpai in the one-roomed barn, which was his storeroom, sitting room, sleeping room, kitchen and bathroom, and he looked almost as though he were a rabbit fascinated by the danger that threatened him.

'Get up and open the door !' said Luxmi shrilly. 'What kind of a man are you that you sit there doing nothing while I am garnishing the spinach !'

'Ooon, hoon ' he answered as though he had suddenly come back from some remote country into which he had wandered away. And, thrusting his hookah towards her, he said : 'Fill me another chilm.'

'Hain—what has happened to you ?' called his wife. 'Have you suddenly been struck by a palsy or something ?' And, gathering her dhoti about her, covering her bare breasts and hair modestly, she ran towards the door.

Ramji leapt from the bed, still holding the narial hookah in his left hand and stood barring her way.

'Don't be crazy,' he whispered. 'I haven't paid the last three-quarters of rent. Do you want me to get a shoe beating from the landlord's men.'

'Let me go,' Luxmi cried. 'Whoever it is at the door has already heard us, and, look, they are peering through the chinks of the door.'

'Oh wait till Shibu comes home,' Ramji said. 'I need

my son, by me if there is going to be any reckoning of accounts . . . And it may be the policias . . . ’

‘ So you suddenly need your “son,” ’ said Luxmi. ‘ Why, you were not very proud of him this morning when he asked you for a little money to go to the fair with. Then you called him “illegally” begotten and disclaimed him—.’

‘ Stop your cain, cain, woman, I am not feeling well,’ said Ramji trembling with anger from under the layers of fear. ‘ How can you be so cruel to me when you know I have no money? Haven’t I treated Shibu as my own son all these years in spite of the fact that you . . . ’

The knocking at the door, which had ceased for a moment at the sound of stirring feet and hushed voices in the house, started again. And Ramji collapsed weakly on the charpai panting for breath and with the pallor of death on his face.

Meanwhile, Luxmi hurried towards the door with an abusive impatience that outmatched the impatience of the man at the door :

‘ May you die! Wait! I am not a machine that I can run to the door and knead the dough at the same time. And who are you, anyhow, making this “Khat-Khat,” at my door? ’

‘ Mother, open the door,’ said a voice meekly. ‘ I am on Sarkari business.’

‘ Now I am undone,’ sighed Ramji. And he shook as though he suddenly had an epileptic fit.

Luxmi unhooked the inner chain and fairly spat in the face of the visitor as she said :

‘ You people never let a person rest—now what do you want? ’

‘ I am a census officer,’ the visitor answered briefly but firmly. He was a short, bony Babu whose only strong points were the points of his neatly trimmed moustache,

with the additional qualification that he knew he had these strong points.

‘What officer?’ Luxmi queried.

‘Census officer!’ answered the Babu and he began to twirl the strong points of his moustache.

Luxmi referred the visitor to her husband with a casual gesture of her head and withdrew to the kitchen.

The visitor called to his attendants and entered.

‘Your name?’ he said without looking at his victim, and lifting the pencil which stood uncannily balanced on the top of his right ear, he got ready to scribble on the file in his hand.

Ramji got up and, laying the cocoanut hookah on one side, began to smooth the charpai. Then with both hands outstretched, he invited the Babu to be seated. All the sinews and fibres in his feeble body, every particle of his craven soul was strained to make the Sarkari official welcome, so that he would not inflict any punishment on him. And he sat down on the floor, with his hands joined abjectly before him, his quivering dumb face raised towards the officer while his eyes glanced furtively this side and that.

‘What is your name?’ the official repeated his question.

Ramji only lifted his joined hands higher by way of an appeal.

‘Speak, what is your name!’ shouted the two attendants of the Babu almost in a chorus.

‘Oh forgive, please forgive me,’ was all that Ramji said by way of an answer.

‘Son of forgiveness, tell me your name, your father’s name, your caste,’ said the Babu impatiently.

‘Huzoor, Mai-bap, forgive,’ wept Ramji. And, touching the Babu’s feet with his right hand, he took the dust from his finger tip to his forehead.

The Babu seemed flattered by this servility on the part

of Ramji and stood twirling his moustache even as he beamed at the stupidity of the peasant.

‘Tell the Babu Sahib your name as he has to go to other houses,’ said the attendants.

‘Huzoor,’ said Ramji, ‘you Sahibs are all powerful Sarkari officials. Surely you can forgive. I have only defaulted on the payment of my dues for three months, because the Rabbi harvest has been bad. Now, if you forgive me and don’t send me to jail this time, I shall make up the arrears and always pay in time. You are like God, all merciful and just, so forgive me this time . . . The Thanedar Sahib has beaten me so hard with his shoe that my body is still aching and my head has gone bald. Take pity on me for the sake of my age . . .’

‘Is the man mad?’ the Babu asked his attendants.

‘Apparently, he is one of the goondas of the peasant union who got a shoe beating at the police chowki last month.’

‘You officers of the secret police know everything, of course, huzoor,’ said Ramji, ‘but I can assure you that I was quite innocent.’

‘But we are not officers of the Secret Police,’ said the Babu. ‘I am a Census Officer, see—the Sarkar is compiling a list of all the citizens of Hindustan and I have to take down the names of all the people in this village.’

Ramji could not make out what a census officer meant and why he should be making a list of all the villagers. Rumour had it that the Sarkar was soon going to arrest all members of the Kisan Sabhas and therefore wanted the names of all the villagers. He would surely be in for it if he gave his name because he had, at the instance of young Shibui, foolishly put his thumb down on the list of the members of the Kisan Sabha and had had to suffer the shoe beating at the Kotwali. Now if the Babu and his attendants were not one kind of secret police official then they were

some other kind of policemen, and he would surely be doomed if he gave his name to them.

‘Huzoor, mai-bap,’ he said, ‘please forgive.’

‘Give your name, fool, or I shall really lose my patience with you,’ shouted the Babu.

Ramji fell away, shrieking as though ten thousand policemen had begun to beat him.

‘Come to your senses, answer them, coward,’ Luxmi called from the kitchen. ‘Why do you weep even before they have begun to beat you.’

‘What is his name, Mai?’ the Babu said turning to her since he saw that she had shown more initiative.

At this Luxmi modestly drew the end of her dhoti on her forehead and relapsed into the dutiful demure Hindu wife who is not supposed to mention the name of her husband.

‘Are they quite mad?’ the Babu said, turning to his attendants.

‘Sir, she being his wife will not, according to custom, mention his name,’ answered the attendants.

‘And he being frightened of the police will not mention his own name?’ the Babu exclaimed. ‘Well, I know a solution to this difficulty—his name will not appear in the census. What is the use of mentioning the name of a half-dead old man on the record anyhow. He just doesn’t exist.’

With those words he turned imperiously towards the door and walked away, presuming that he had deprived Ramji of the greatest honour which the Sarkar could bestow on him.

The old peasant lifted his eyes surreptitiously from where he lay, but kept still until the officials were out of sight. Then he got up with some alacrity and, picking up his cocoanut hookah, cocked an eye at Luxmi.

'The light of heaven has suddenly come into your eyes, coward !' his wife said. 'Look at you winking at me !'

'Crazy woman, you don't know how we have just managed to escape. I tell you the best thing these days is to remain as far out of the reach of the Sarkar as possible...'

And he began to blow at the dead coals and cinders in his chilum to revive the hookah.

'Coward ! You crawl with fear at the sight of any man who comes your way in the village,' said Luxmi.

'My father taught me,' answered Ramji, 'work more and make fewer friends.' And he tried to look profound above the yellow pupils of his eyes.

'Oh you make me ill," remonstrated Luxmi, 'always trying to hide behind my skirt, as though you were a little child frightened of bogeymen.'

'Woman,' Ramji counselled, 'if rulers be tyrants, throw up your land, burn your plough and scatter with the wind—to come back like a whirlwind later.' And, after delivering this homily he puffed at his hookah and looked smug. Only, the live coal in the chilum had become dead cinders and he thrust the hookah towards his wife.

'Coward ! Coward !' shouted Luxmi, 'Coward.' And she came and spat upon him.

At this Ramji was stung to the quick. And he got up and caught hold of his wife by the bun of hair at the back of her head, for if anger once comes on the weak it comes more suddenly than on the strong.

Luxmi retaliated by getting hold of a broom in the classic manner of the peasant wife, and she dusted him hard with it wherever her short arms could reach out against the resilient pressure of his wiry hands.

And they had a good set to and would have hurt each other if their son hadn't come at that instant and protectively shielded his mother against the father.

Ramji was mad at the favouritism the boy showed towards Luxmi. And he delivered himself of a maxim which expressed the whole essence of his outlook upon human destiny :

‘A ruler who is hard upon his subjects as a spider on the flies, a woman who abuses her husband, and a son who is more his mother’s son than his father’s—these three are utterly bad and ought to be shunned like the plague.’

Only, he loved his land, and the hookah which his wife or his son were constantly filling for him, too much to renounce life altogether.

Lament on the Death of a Master of Arts

(To Marian Evans)

‘OHE, what is your condition?’ Nur heard the voice of his father through his broken half-sleep as from far away. His eyes opened against his will. In the stillness of that hour the gigantic, padded-faced, wry-mouthed presence of the Chaudhri, terrifying like Nero, seemed inauspicious. Nur closed his eyes, dipping them into the comfort of sleep and escaping from the fear that his father’s form sent through him. . . .

‘Ohe, what is your condition? I am asking you,’ said the Chaudhri advancing from the foot of the bed. And, without waiting for an answer, he continued: ‘Have you been comfortable in the night? You haven’t had any blood, I hope?’

Nur was terrified that his father would come nearer. Half opening his eyes, he said in a whisper : ' Better.' And, as if to ward off the Chaudhri's stare, he tried to assume the casual tones of the healthy person which he knew he was expected to be.

' Why can't you answer properly, swine ? Why do you sulk all the time ? ' the Chaudhri said, his grey-green eyes flashing. ' You should try and make an effort to get well, as I can't go on breaking myself to pay the Doctor's fees every morning ? '

' I am better, Chaudhriji,' Nur said, still assuming a normal manner. ' I am much better.'

' Acha then, wake up now and mention the name of Allah-Mian for a change,' the Chaudhri said softening. And he hesitated for a moment, looked round the bed and added : ' Your grandmother will be coming down soon....'

Then shaking his head and making a grimace, he swerved on his feet and walked away.

Nur closed his eyes so as not to see his retreating form. A moment before the Chaudhri had turned, the boy's gaze had fallen on the prickly silver bristles of his unshaven beard, and he recoiled. He could hear the stamping of the Chaudhri's feet going down the stairs. He quavered, struggling to throw off the spell of fear which his father cast on him. He twisted his lips as waves of resentment warmed his heavy, sleepy limbs. ' No, I don't want to live,' he said with the obstinate spite of a child, and then to strengthen his sense of opposition, added : ' I wish I were dead.' And as soon as he said it he wanted to stifle the thought : his father's footsteps were out of the reach of his ears now.

The body of death lingered on the sick bed, wrapped in a white shroud. . . .

Waking in a hot sweat from his half-sleep he could see it

lying there, on the giant bed in the narrow front room on the first floor of his father's congested two-storied house : It was his own body ; it looked like a corpse because he had gathered the sheet tight round him at night, and because he was dying, dying of consumption.

A slight tremor of panic ran through him at the thought, with a subtle violence. He stirred on his back and shuffled his legs about. Then, quickly loosening the sheet from his side, as if he were arranging himself in readiness for the visit of the Doctor, he spread the cloth till it sagged into a ruffled disorder, and sought to still the ache of apprehension.

If only his heart would stop fluttering, he thought impatiently. ' You mustn't talk of death,' as grandma would say, ' May I be your sacrifice,' and ' What an inauspicious talk they do.'

He moved his head, but couldn't shake off the vision, so he began to hum the melody of a verse written by Iqbal, his wife's namesake, a favourite tune of his. The half-serious, half-playful sentiment in it was so appropriate ' Your love has straightened all the curves of my life... '

He didn't complete the verse ; the lack of faith in his voice betrayed the fear for his lungs.

He was becoming obsessed again now. . . .

His fine face, with the slightly dilated nostrils, with the brown eyes bulging out of the deep sockets, and the indrawn cheeks, was flushed, not with the rich pink of the Sahibs, as it had always been flushed since his childhood, but with the shame of a rose which has withered before it has begun to bloom. His body was limp except for the spine, which ached as it had ached increasingly through having to lie in bed day after day for five months, and the hard ribs and collar bone which seemed to crack as they rose out of his transparent flesh like the dry roots of a bare tree still sound

at the heart. But he was calm as if his whole body, eaten through by the germ, was sensitive to his doom ; the clear forehead, that sighted with cool composure each anxious thought in his fevered brain, wrestling with the problem of how to get well, the skeleton of his chest which rose and fell with the nervous heart beats beneath it as if eager to know how to get better, the tender eyes that bent their light, now inwards, now outwards, and the dry lips on which the ghost of a sigh waited to become evanescent.

During the past months he had felt his perceptions become acuter : he had noticed the change from summer to autumn in almost every shade of air, as it touched his eyes, his lips, his ears and the cells of his body. But lucidity of this knowledge was being continually baulked by the fear, the obsession which possessed him.

He turned over and felt the terror of falling from the terrace at the top of the house. Only it was like a fall in a slow motion picture, slipping slowly past every fraction of an inch. If only one could catch hold of the projection of the terrace, or if only there was an obstruction on the way, one might be saved. Why didn't the Chaudhri have wooden awnings built on the top of the windows ? They would have arrested the glare of the sun during the day, and they would have checked a fall if someone, anyone, a child or, no, a cat fell.

He made an effort to stop the morbid run of his thought, shook his head as if to deafen his own cries, and blinked his eyes at the phantom of peril.

'Life is short and art is long,' he muttered tiredly a phrase he had learnt at college. Then he lifted his head and looked at the bars of light which shone like the silvery spokes of the day through the chinks of the closed windows. 'Grandmother will be coming down from the kitchen to see me,' he said to himself.

She always came down first thing in the morning, the poor old woman, and again the last thing at night. And when he was a child, she had told him lots of fairy stories. He remembered that one which she had told him after his mother had died and which he had retold her with several variations during the holidays.

‘How did it run?’

Once upon a time there was a little boy whose father was a confectioner in the bazaar and whose mother was a beautiful houri. And he had an old grandmother who loved him very much and who used to take him to his father’s shop to eat a sweet pancake and semolina every morning. And he used to toddle and walk holding the hand of his father among the grease and the grime, among the soot of steaming cauldrons and deep black-bottomed pans, full of treacle and clarified butter, and the mud of coolies’ feet bearing sacks of sugar, fruit and flour. And then he had learnt to speak. And when he spoke it was such a pretty speech that they said to his father: ‘He ought to be sent to the Government school when he grows up, for he will surely become a Babu with his pretty speech.’ And because he had a lovely pink face, with dark brown eyes and sleek brown hair, they said: ‘He will surely pass his M.A. and become a deputy collector Sahib.’ And he had been so happy to hear their prophecies, and he had become so naughty and enthusiastic, that he would smack anybody who did not give him a pice just as if he were already a deputy collector. But when he was five, the cruel angel Izrael had come and taken away his mother. And he had cried when his mother, who was a houri, did not come back from the heaven where she had gone visiting. And another woman had come into their house instead, who, his father had said, was his new mother. But she was only a little bigger than he and he could not call her mother as she

quarrelled with him over the toys when they played together. And he had been sad as he had never been sad before. But his grandmother loved him and doted upon him just like his mother, and she laid him in her arms as she made garlands for sale in the bazaar. And then, one day, his father had come to him and said to him that he was grown up now and must go to school to learn to be a big Babu and get an M.A. Pass, and that he would receive a picc a day for his pocket if he did his lessons well, and that if in addition he came home and learnt the Koran and said the five prayers prescribed by religion, he would get two picc. And that was the day he had started to be a 'Master of Arts'

'But, oh, why did they drag me into the dust by making me a Master of Arts?' he wearily protested, falling back exhausted, the words trailing like a long pain though they had emerged quite casually in a spontaneous new rhythm.

There was the glow of revelation about them, about the ordinary but natural and expressive sequence into which they had flowed, even though they were born of the doom which sat on him. And the memories of his past seemed to come back to him in their track as if they were an 'open sesame'; seemed to come back with the force and vivacity of rapiers thrust in the raw wounds of his heart. For from the first cry at birth his life had been pain-marred.

'Sh, Sh,' his mother had warned the world and consoled him, the inconsolable: 'What is it then, didums, di, di, mother's darling, di. didi, dum . . . then he is hungry . . . don't cry, then, mother's dearest, loveliest darling . . . he has been neglected then . . . my pet . . . my darling . . . don't cry then. . . .'. And she had swayed him in her arms, cheek to cheek, flesh to flesh in tenderness . . . slow glory of touch crept into the rapture of smiles, bubbling with the joy of being borne and tickled to laughter . . .

'Oh mother, oh mother, where are you now?'

Beyond the corpse in the darkness of the grave she had become a ghost. In the silence of his doom he wondered whether through the barriers of all these years, her heart could still beat with a piteous sound for him, whether it could still bleed with warm love and anguish at the sound of his tears. 'In the name of the merciful and the compassionate God,' she used to say, and gather him into her arms if he woke up in the night, gather him with a surging agony of warmth, answered only by his cries, and still patient when his father heaped all the curses and all the abuse, all the complaints of the mortal wrongs he had suffered to be awakened by the row . . . Ebbing with time, receding into thin air, remote she was now, buried under the mound of earth in the cemetery outside Lohgarh gate, which was surrounded by the aura of fear in the night, of suspense in the still whiteness of the noon, except on Fridays when people went to visit the Pir who kept guard on the graves and muttered charms to keep the ghosts away, in return for the gifts and for the pice tendered him. He remembered the horror of a moment when his grandmother had taken him there and he had seen a skull beside a crumbling mound in the empty sockets of which millions of ants were crawling. He had wondered whether his mother had become an ugly demon with a malevolent steady stare in the pits of her head and a terrible changeless grin on the thrusting teeth exposed from hard, indrawn lips.

But surely she wasn't eaten by the worms . . . No, no, not his mother . . . though why not ?

He jerked his body and compressed his lips tight so that he shouldn't moan, shouldn't even sigh, and he took the fingers of his right hand to his left to feel the pulse, though he didn't listen to the verdict, only mechanically registering the pumping of the blood.

Far off from this dawn, remote, half forgotten. ages before

now, before the high school and college, there was a queer impatience, in the feel of early mornings, the fear of being late at school, the violent motion in the belly even as he had gulped hot tea and swallowed mouthfuls of fried *parathas* dipped in mutton gravy . . . Thank God, one was rid of that, though it had taken him a long time, for he was seldom ill even though he had prayed in secret to be ill . . . As he had hurried on his way to school, the dizzy vision of the Master's perpendicular rod had blotted out space and time while the clothes stuck to the flesh in the clammy heat and perspiration of summer mornings. His grandmother had no sense of time and did not start cooking his meal until she had said her prayers and swept the rooms of the house from the top storey to the ground floor . . . He had begged his father to buy him a watch, one of those nice shiny watches with a chain which he could carry in the pocket of his waist-coat to school, as all the other boys had watches and wouldn't show them to him except from a distance, affecting to be superior Sahibs like Mercado Sahib, the Headmaster. But his father had said, that he ought to get up by the Muezzin's call at dawn and say prayers every morning. And then this additional trouble had been added to his difficulties as a kind of reward for his attempt to be happy and fashionable. For, as the fat Mullah in the mosque at the end of the narrow lane, in which the flies buzzed over the children's yellow excretions in the drain, sounded the Muezzin's call, he had to shake himself out of the bed lest his father might beat him for disobeying. And, although he did not know how to say the prayers, he had to run to the mosque to do the wuzu, wash himself, join the congregation and follow it in the various postures : sit, stand, kneel, rub his forehead on the ground and murmur the verses in Arabic which the Mullah had taught him by rote during the special lessons he gave

him in the evenings, in return for the rich meals, the new turban, the shirt, the shalwars, the shawl, the shoes and other 'presents' which he received for looking after the spiritual welfare of the Chaudhri's son. 'God gives man gifts to obtain his own ends.' He muttered the proverb ironically.

What was the use of all those prayers, he had never been able to discover in his life. He had never been able to learn Arabic well enough to understand the Koran, though he had repeated the *Suras* from the first page to the last hundreds of times. What was the use of cleaning and purifying oneself, for instance, if the clothes one wore when saying prayers were soiled by all the dirt of the streets and the sweat of the body at night . . . And though he had never told anyone, while he was saying prayers on a constipated belly he had involuntarily discharged a stinking wind which had fairly resounded back from the walls of the mosque to his own ears so that it had made him burst out with an embarrassed laugh, though the elders in the congregation who were themselves used to letting loose wind had carried on with their prayers, only turning their eyes a little. He had been afraid that God must have heard it, but then he had reassured himself that since he discharged wind because of the exercise involved in kneeling, bending, standing, sitting and kneeling again, which was the prescribed method of saying prayers, surely God would forgive him for his sin. 'Thus is the word of thy Lord verified against those who commit abomination !' What a fool he had been to grieve over the wrath of that impotent oracle of blind vision, 'the merciful and the compassionate God, to whom all praise belongs, who is the Lord of all worlds, the ruler of the Day of Judgment, whom all humanity serves and whom it asks for aid and to whom

the fat Mullah calls out in deafening cries every morning, noon, afternoon, evening and night !'

'In the face of the falsehood and lure of the world, I could laugh,' he said to himself.

And yet he felt cheated to be fading away imprisoned in this room with his allotted hours and days, how many he did not know, being conscious only of his heart beating, pounding at his chest in the silence of the morning, mingling with the hum of a long-drawn wail, far off like the din of his soul in strife, and near, as near as where the cock crowed on the roof of someone's house in the gully.

The illness seemed to have deafened his ears as if the burnt-up tissue in his body had risen in the haze and clogged that sense, but otherwise he felt lighter, more transparent.

He applied his ears and listened attentively, his gaze fluttering as though he were looking for something which he had lost in this room or trying to remember something which he had forgotten.

'Allah-ho-Akbar,' came the voice of the Mullah.

'Dur, dur, dog,' Nur murmured rising out of his resignation, angered by the groans of a dry as dust formalist fed by the food of charity.

'Call the faithful to prayer, call them to prayer, you dog. I hate you and I hate your God. I hate you all ! To incur your wrath I spit on your face and I spit on the face of your God !' And he was about to raise himself from his pillow to give his words the confirmation of the act when a choking cough seized him and he was caught in the paroxysms of an agony that seemed as if it would be his last.

'Nur, Nur, my child, what is it my son ? What is it, my darling son ?' his grandmother called, coming down the stairs.

She had the lines of her seventy odd years written on her

face and hobbled miserably, shaking her head as if she were drunk.

He coughed and the effort seemed to stir each fibre of his being, the scourge of that uncertainty which had possessed him for months.

His grandmother bent her twisted, wrinkled face, straining to touch his forehead with her lips, but unable to do so as the salt tide of tears dimmed her sight. Her hands shook convulsively with the effort of bending.

'What is it, my child? What is it, my son? May I be your sacrifice?' she soothed with pouting lips.

'Nothing, grandmother, nothing is the matter,' he said gasping for breath as if he had lost a heartbeat. 'I am all right, I am all right. You go and rest.'

'Do have some of the tea I have made for you, my son,' she said, 'do have a sip . . . I will open the windows—the sun is shining outside.' But as he had closed his eyes and paled for a moment, she opened her mouth, frightened, and looked at him dazedly.

'Acha, acha,' he sighed impatiently lest she should fuss. 'But don't open the windows. You go and rest.'

She hobbled by the side of the bed and relaxed. Then with indifferent fingers she pulled the quilt, which he had thrown away on one side during the night, over his legs. Glancing around to see whether everything was in order she scanned his face casually, as if she had come to accept the deathlessness of his sick body, and she lingered by the bedside.

He felt oppressed by her presence as if she had disturbed him and brought on his spasm of coughing.

'It isn't that I am a child any more, grandma,' he said. 'I will be all right, you go and rest.'

'You are still a child to me, my son,' she said. 'Are you sure you will be all right? There is your tea. I have

put it on the shelf. Now are you sure ? I will see to the meal then. I will go.' And looking around and under the bed, she lifted the chamber and said again : ' Acha, I will go. But call me if you need anything . . . '

As the image of her hobbling, bent form receded, he pitied and hated her. She was his father's mother. And always he had pitied and hated her. The pride of his love for his dead mother had never overcome the barrier of the wrong she had done him in allowing his father to marry again. And since she had aged too he had never been able to overcome her ugliness ; and the weight of her doting affection had only increased the barrier.

In the prolonged weariness of five bed-ridden months the ebb and flow of his hope in life had infused in him a strange tenderness for everyone and he had loved her for her devotion. She was old and stupid and stumbling, but there was something so pitiable about her that he had let her take the place of his mother. And yet the bitterness of her calm acceptance of his father's brutality persisted, the bitterness of those howls which he had uttered when his father beat him and the tears he had shed, tears of shame and chagrin when he had been made to accept the humiliation of orders from his step-mother, of the suffering they had all tried to extract from him.

' They all tried to oppress me, they have broken and crushed me and left me destroyed, and now they make a fuss of me and fetch me medicines and run here and there trying to save my life, the hypocrites ! ' he muttered under his breath, and looked away at the books that lay by the bottles of medicine on the narrow shelf, crowded by the odds and ends of his step-mother, her looking glass, and her assortment of glass bangles.

As he turned over he felt the weakness of his lungs go silently to his head, and he lay still in a sleepy inertia

through which the bundles of dirty clothes that hung like festoons from the coloured pegs on the walls, the stacks of cheaply painted trunks and the sacks of sugar over which the rats had pissed in stinking green patterns, seemed to become unbearably depressing. The white-washed walls blackened by the soot of slow hearth-fires in the gulley seemed to be crowding in on him and the feeling that he could never get up and escape from the sordid reality of his home into the world of tall mirrors and gilded chairs and mahogany tables depicted at the Mahna Singh Theatre, made him hopeless.

A fresh twitching of the lungs frightened him. He closed his eyes and tried not to move even the fraction of an inch, obsessed by the superstitious awe which the Doctor's orders not to excite himself in any way had spread over him.

And, for a moment, he lay resigned and apathetic like a corpse which does not care about the soil it is laid on, though his eyelids pressed heavily and his nerves quivered as if his inside had become more acutely sensitive to the fear and sorrow that had crushed him through the last months.

He felt a hard knot of saliva settling in the passage of his throat.

He stirred his throat and half opening his eyes, spat into the spittoon. He closed his eyes, afraid to see the dark-red-white flame trailing down from his mouth. He fell back exhausted. It was terrible to be so weak. He sought to rest again, closing his eyes in the warmth through which swirled the noise of sparrows twittering in the lane. He lent himself to the soothing warmth of the pillows beneath his head and accepted his helplessness.

'What was I thinking before Grandma came?' he asked himself. But there was no answer from the depths of his

body which now seemed stretched in a repose morbidly expectant. His heavy heart beat out a refrain : ' I must get well, I must get well,' as if it were still drugged with its obstinate belief in existence. And there was a quickening at the back of his head.

In the dim light of the half-sleep which came over him, beyond the massed clouds of darkness, he was walking by the thick, muddy, sewage stream over-flowing with slime, that ran in the shadow of the town's red brick wall and into which people emptied rats, live snakes, dead dogs and cats. . . . There was the foul reek of dung and urine from the trolley train which ran from the houses of the sweepers through the town wall past the gate of Lohgarh to the vast valley near the Bhagtanwallah Gate, where the refuse was burnt. . . . He had often wanted to become an engine driver so that he could drive the little engine of this train . . . But the vision of the black-skinned, white-clad Master with a primly cut, scraggy beard had remained. The Master stood in the class-room, by the shoemakers' houses, the corners of his eyes red shot with rage as if he were made of some unearthly clay, and he, Nur, had entered late. In one fearful moment he had trembled merely to see the fresh cane which lay on the table ; he had known that the accusation in the Master's eyes was coloured by revenge rather than by the anger at his lateness : the Master had asked him to bring him a basket of sweets from his father's shop and when he had begged his father to give him the gift to offer to the Master, the Chaudhri had refused, saying, ' I don't keep a shop for the purpose of charity, it is hard enough for me to make a living and pay your school fees.' And, of course, he had never dared to tell this to the Master. . . . The dread of the greedy dog, as he stood there, grimly seeped into his bones. And when the demon actually lifted the cane, he began to shriek in agony, whereupon the

Master shouted to him, 'Be quiet or I will give you one stripe more for every one after which you howl!' And as he howled and cried, 'Oh spare me, oh spare me, Masterji,' long before the sweep of every blow from the cane shimmered before his terror-stricken eyes, the ghost of the devil had worked himself up to an even grimmer rage so that his words tumbled over each other as he numbered the blows, while he begged, prayed, supplicated to the cruel tyrant, drifting further and further and shouting the more, though he knew that his protest would increase the sum of his punishment. . . . In a corner of the room he sat alternately hating his mother, who stood in the chamber of horrors, in the oblivion of her hell raging with fire and water, for not coming to his rescue, and loving her as she stood with tears of despair in her eyes and arms outstretched, appealing to the angel Gabriel to help her son. 'Oh mother, don't be silly; don't whine like a pauper,' he said as he nursed his smarting limbs, unable to lift his eyes for shame, as the tears welled in them against his will. 'We have some prestige. The Chaudhri is respected by the whole bazaar and I shall ask him to report to the Head Master . . . ' But if the Chaudhri saw the Head Master the Munshi would become far more revengeful. . . . Already he had made a slip at spelling and the Master was putting pencils between his fingers and pressing them hard, hard, harder, and Nur could see himself writhing and shrieking and crying as he rolled on the floor to release his cracking bones from the Master's grasp. . . .

The torment flushed his face above the dream which strayed vaguely back from the school compound to the cement tank in which the devout at the mosque washed their feet in muddy water. . . .

He was swaying up and down, reading the *Suras* aloud by the light of the cotton wick soaked in olive oil in the

earthen saucer lamp in a corner of the mosque, the Koran laid on a book-rest before him, when he felt himself dozing from the fatigue of a long day. Suddenly from the darkness behind him there was a kick in his ribs and Maulvi Shahab-Din stood, caressing his beard and shouting : ' Beware, son of a swine, and recite the *Suras* or else your mean, dirty father will tell me that I don't deserve any new clothes this year because I haven't taught you to remember the *Suras*. . . . ' And coming home through the dark, dirty lane where bulls roamed and fakirs prowled, he slipped into the gutter and bruised his elbow and cried to his grandmother. His father was in the lavatory upstairs and terror seeped into the house. The Chaudhri came down suddenly and gave him two slaps for complaining and whining all the time, and he was sulking with the shame of his humiliation, not showing his face to anyone, refusing to eat his food and abusing grandma, and she was saying she would buy him some sweets at a shop which stock English peppermints.

Now the barren waste of a flat plain arose, rank with cactus and brown burnt grass sinouldering in the heat of the day, beyond which loomed a fortress, dirtied by time to an ochre, brown cinnabar, except for the crimson cupolas and battlements overgrown with moss. He was wandering alone in it, making for the moat which was full of stones and splinters and knife-edged grass, and as he drifted across it, sulking and forlorn, he was whimpering in a broken, self-pitying voice : ' Why doesn't God give me death ? ' The fortress became the formal red brick building of the Government High School and beyond were two mounds like pyramids in the desert of Kerbala ; a caravan of camels, tied nose to tail, tail to nose, was travelling slowly in the torrid glare of a blue sky whitening with the hot sighs of the burnt earth and with his sobs, as he ran to and fro, looking for the shade of a palm tree, on bare feet blistering

with the fire of the bright yellow sand. . . . He was weeping with broken, spluttering cries, the sweat was pouring down his body, and he was tired of his fruitless search for the oasis in the barren expanse of the sun-soaked land. Now he was on the outskirts of the Railway Station, and, by a dump of iron girders, wooden beams, the cinders of burnt coal and rubbish, stood a grove of trees surrounding a tank. He stooped and put his mouth to the pool in the forest like an animal and drank off the liquid till his belly was bursting . . . As he turned round to look at the jungle it was Gol Bagh where he had gone to play cricket with his friends during the school days. . . . He was alone and it was twilight and he was hurrying home, afraid that his father would beat him if he had happened to come home from the shop to relieve himself and found that Nur hadn't returned. But not all the alacrity he put into his steps could shorten the long dusty distance to Lohgarh past the fuelwood stalls, past the dirty, greasy cookshops for travellers, compared to which his father's shop was a luxury palace, past the pedlars who hawked cabbages, turnips, cucumbers, and melons as they bent over their three-wheeled, square, box-structured wheel-barrows, to guard against the pilfering Hindu women who refused to move without getting something for nothing after they had made their purchases, past the panting Kashmiri coolies, loaded with sacks of flour on their back, their brows glistening with sweat and feet coated with mud, and past the stream of dead Hindus swathed in red cloth painted with golden stars borne hurriedly along for a late funeral by groups of men chanting, 'The name of God is Truth. . . .' The slow chant seemed to become muffled, turning into the whisper of a breeze which was creeping into him with the premonition that one of the ghosts, which according to the Hindus strayed about the earth before rising to heaven, was following him and

would pounce on him if he looked back. . . . Though there were people about, though he had walked far away from the funeral ground enclosed by a high wall where the dead were burnt, he was possessed by the dread, so that he started running fast, heading straight for his father's shop instead of going home under the lonely shadow of the city wall. . . . In the sullen eyes, staring out of the Chaudhri's body was a cruel power. 'Where have you been, rape mother?' and Nur trembled to see the sweat pouring down his father's hot, angry face in the light of the smoking kerosene lamp. 'Where are your shoes, swine? Where have you lost them? Where have you been eating the dust?' the Chaudhri burst out as he caught hold of a rope and came to hit him. 'There is no talk, Chaudhriji, forgive him,' a customer interceded, taking Nur under shelter. Whereupon the Chaudhri swung back to his seat scattering the flies off the foodstuff and cursing: 'What is the use of having a son! He goes about loafing! As if I was a millionaire and he had nothing to do. It wouldn't occur to him to come to help me for a few hours. And now he has lost his shoes! Where did you lose your shoes?' Nur was dumb with terror and began to sob, feeling as if one of the evil ghosts had come and taken possession of his father and would probably follow him home and kill him in the dark of the lane. 'Why don't you speak?' the Chaudhri said and leapt upon him dealing blows till the whole bazaar crowded round to save him from his father's wrath. The customer who had been shielding him had lifted him and brought him home. . . . He was still weeping and didn't want to face anyone, not even his benefactor nor his grandmother. He only wanted to sleep. . . . But there was broad daylight out of the windows and the air didn't seem sinister. . . . What was that? . . .

He opened his eyes with a start, so suddenly that the

pupils under his heavy-eyelids smarted and there was a cracking ache at the back of his head. There stood Gama, a tall black boy who had been a class-fellow of Nur's since the infant form till he had been left behind in the fifth class through successive failures, and had given up schooling to become a tonga-driver for Fateh Ali, the contractor.

'Still asleep, Nur, childling?' Gama asked. 'How are you now? I was passing this way. I thought I would look in and see you.'

'Come, do sit down,' Nur said in a slow voice. 'I was just dozing, just thinking, half dreaming, curiously enough I was dreaming about our old school.'

'And I opened the windows and let in the sunshine on that purgatory,' Gama said with a mischievous light in his eyes. Then, sitting down on an edge of the bed, he bent his head and continued: 'What is there in education, brother? Waste of time.' He was half chagrined as he had never been able to outlive the reproach of having failed in his education, and half-audacious because of a genuine contempt for learning that he had achieved since he had become a tonga-driver.

'Education, education, brother,' said Nur affecting a learned voice, 'education means wisdom; wisdom means the correlation of the growth of body and mind: the correlation of the growth of body and mind is achieved through knowledge and knowledge is power: if you have enough recommendations, that is.' After this he smiled a nervous, apologetic smile as if he were afraid that in spite of his faint mockery, Gama might think he was showing off his superior knowledge, for his friend, in spite of the fact that he was earning more than hundreds of M.A.'s, had a feeling of inferiority engendered by the exaggerated respect for degrees that people had, specially as he was employed in a profession which was well known for its low hooliganism.

Seeing, however, that Gama was smiling good humouredly, Nur added: 'You are right, brother. You are right.' And he heaved a deep breath and changed his side as if to shake off his lethargy. Gama's visit had surprised him.

'Do you remember Master Kanshi Ram?' asked Gama, laughing. 'When we were in the fifth primary class . . .'

Nur smiled in answer. He did remember for he had suffered from Kanshi, who had established a vendetta against him, because he refused to accept the privilege of taking private tuition from the Master, along with the sons of the rich merchants of the cloth market. Kanshi charged ten rupees a month from each of the boys and Nur didn't know how he could ask his father for the money, specially as it was well known that the Master made immoral suggestions to the boys when they went to his house to be coached. One day when he had been left alone in the class-room filling his satchel at the end of the school session, Kanshi had even tried to kiss him and because he had refused to be kissed, the Master had beaten him on the knuckles with a ruler the next morning by making the flimsiest excuse about his pronunciation as he read aloud. Nur had told Gama, who had caught hold of Kanshi by the scruff of the neck that very afternoon and threatened to kill him if he didn't behave, after which, indeed, Nur had been safe.

'I often see him about,' Gama said. 'He has got grey hair now but he is incorrigible. He still goes about chasing boys. I regret that I didn't beat him up, the old sod . . .'

There was a slight bravado in his voice and he chuckled to think of his exploits of those days when he was a wild, free creature, respected for his courage, and not the slave harnessed to Sheikh Fateh Ali's tonga, like a skinny horse. Then he bent his head again and seemed to retreat into himself.

‘What is the talk?’ Nur asked, feeling the slow burning of a fever in his flesh. He turned his side and saw a basket of fruit by his bed which apparently Gama had bought. ‘Why did you do that?’

‘There is no talk of that, brother,’ said Gama. ‘You will get well and we won’t care for the limp lord. After all, you used to let me copy the sums from your notebooks during the vacations—although do you remember the occasion on which my father almost broke my bones when he caught me copying your answers and I ran away to Calcutta . . . ?’ And he laughed.

‘Yes, I remember,’ Nur said.

It was not so much the memory of Gama’s troubles that he recalled, however, as those of his own. But how far away seemed those endless days when he had trudged to and back from school from this house in Dhab Khatikan, through the narrow deep-rutted intricate bazaars, full of puddles of rain water, where the carts got stuck against each other and held up the traffic for hours; days of utter loneliness only relieved by the few hours of play and an occasional fair to which he was taken by his grandmother; when he had been baulked by the terror of jinns and bhuts and churels and other denizens of the nether worlds over which, the Koran said, presided His Satanic Majesty, the Devil, days when he had become conscious of the dearth of books and friends and of his father’s poverty which was responsible for them, dull, irrelevant days when he was obsessed by the desire to grow up as quickly as possible. He had wanted the dignity of age.

‘I have written, rather thought of, the first line of a poem this morning,’ Nur said.

‘Who is there? Who is that with you?’ came the voice of his grandmother from the top of the stairs. ‘It is not your father, is it?’

‘No, grandma . . .’ he called back.

‘It’s me, Gama, grandmother,’ the visitor shouted so that Nur might not strain himself by answering, and he turned to his sick friend to see if he had been disturbed by his shout.

Nur’s face was glowing with a pale light though there was a distant look in his eyes, as if he were excited by the visit of his friend, and yet beyond caring for company. So few of his old college friends came to see him, that his whole body seemed thrilled by this contact.

‘Are you sure that I am not tiring you?’ said Gama.

Nur moved his head in negation and smiled.

‘Acha then, what is this that you have written, my poet?’ asked Gama, half-mockingly.

‘I offer the beginning,’ Nur said, affecting the elaborate manner of Urdu poets. ‘Why did you drag me into the dust by making me an M.A. . . .’ And then, half closing his eyes, he sought to control the muscles of his mouth which were weakening. But he was overcome by self-pity and he felt the tears come to his eyes. He tried to show a brave face by grinding his teeth as if he were swallowing some poisonous physic which was soon going to twist his body into an ugly horror.

Gama sat still for a moment, looking away, then he leant on the bed and laid a limp hand on Nur’s chest.

Across the barriers of pain that sundered him from everyone, Nur strained to touch his friend, but his regret for his failures held him back.

He sighed and closed his eyes for a moment.

In a flash he could see the cool mango-groves where he had gone with Gama. The boy had been kind to him, getting him baskets of fruits from the gardeners to bring home, but he used to beat other people viciously. From the time Gama had left school, why even before that,

because he was the son of a vegetable stall-keeper in Chok Farid, one of the most disreputable quarters of the town, the violence of his deeds had become legendary, and Nur had never really regarded his friend's life as in any way consistent with inner goodness, and had always been afraid of his hooliganism. The hulking shape of the boy's huge frame and the profession he had adopted after years of vagabondage were against him too, and Nur recalled how often, since going to college, he had cut him so as not to get a bad name. Now he felt his own superiority lie like a blot upon his heart . . .

'Nur, little one, may I go and fetch the Doctor?' Gama asked with a broken voice.

'No, you sit here and talk to me a little—that is, if you are not losing fares all the time,' Nur said. 'The Doctor will soon come on his morning visit, and then you can go.'

'Are you sure you don't feel bad?' Gama asked.

'Yes, I am all right,' Nur said, seeking to ease the strain he felt in accepting the gesture of his friend's tenderness. 'You know,' he continued, to excuse his separateness, 'the physical exhaustion leaves me so apathetic that I feel as if my back were broken.'

But even as he said so he knew that it was the hardening of his heart through his disillusionment and not the apathy that made him incapable of lifting his hand from under the sheet and putting it into Gama's.

'It is strange that you say: "Why did you drag me into the dust by making me an M.A.?"' Gama said to overcome the sudden gulf between them. 'Didn't you like going to College? I . . . ' But he didn't finish what he was going to say: that though he had made capital out of his failures at school and his consequent inability to go to college by developing a roughness of action and passion, he would have liked to have gone through a long educational

course if only to evade the responsibility of having to earn a living for some more years, especially as one could indulge in any vice and never get a bad name if only one disguised oneself under the name of 'student.'

'Yes, brother,' Nur said and then, sensing the reason for Gama's hesitation, added, 'The unattainable seems great. But if you are poor you can't get anywhere; if you can't keep pace with the fashions invented by the rich students, they dub you mean and cut you. Ach, there couldn't be any worse snobbery in the world than that of the . . . ' And he impatiently twisted his face as if the very thought of poverty evoked in him a kind of disgust, and there was the knowledge of all the little pinpricks and humiliations to his self-respect that he had suffered because he was a confectioner's son.

For a moment he lay confused. Then he felt his temples throb with the fretting and he tried to calm himself by looking away. His eyes stared at the dilapidated ceiling where the cobwebs hung to their nets among the thick coils of soot, and his face seemed to become enchantingly childlike, as if it had never suffered the pang of a sigh.

'It was a lucky escape from the prison of that school, where I had always been afraid of being beaten,' he said smiling. 'Nobody could beat you at college and the professors treated everyone as gentlemen. And in a way it was as Azad might have said, "a golden summer during which I plucked the blossoms from the orchards of many colourful nights and days" . . . '

'Oh, you mean Azad, the Teddy Sahib, who was your friend, the son of the Health Officer who went mad because he failed to become a deputy collector. Or do you mean the poet, Maulana Muhammad Husein Azad?' Gama asked with a slight trace of mockery in his voice.

'I mean Teddy,' Nur said wistfully. 'Isn't it terrible

that he should go off his head? He was a marvel, you know . . .’

‘He must have been, that’s why he went mad, I suppose,’ said Gama with a trace of malice. He had been jealous of Nur’s friendship with Azad.

‘No, really, Gamian,’ Nur said, rising excitedly to the defence of his friend, ‘he was the only friend I made at college, and he was really wonderful . . . He was driven to madness by people and our kind of bullock’s life . . .’ He opened his mouth to say something loudly, but thought better of it and sank back, coughing, biting his lips and churning the froth in his mouth.

Gama rubbed his chest slowly, soothingly and contemplated his face, rather frightened. But Nur opened his eyes, breathed a few deep breaths and, smiling, lay still for a moment, and said: ‘Since the last few days, I have been getting these choking breaths. Yesterday my breathing was better, but I don’t know why I am gasping this morning.’

‘You must not worry about anyone,’ Gama said, ‘You must lie still.’

‘I am all right,’ Nur said slowly. ‘And really I must tell you about poor Azad. You never liked him, you see, you didn’t meet him. He was really maddened by our kind of existence . . . I remember that the first time I saw him come up to college, dressed in his khaki shirt, shorts, and khaki polo topee, an impetuous little fellow, on a rusty old bicycle, I thought the same as you . . . But the older boys were making fun of the first year fools and they hid Azad’s bicycle and his hat when he went to see the Principal. And when he came out they ragged him by making rude noises, as he looked for his belongings. He could see it in their eyes that they had hidden the things and he asked them smilingly to give them to him. But they refused to

own up and just mocked. You would have been sorry for him if you had been there and you would have admired what he did. He challenged them all and fell upon them. I have never seen anything like it—the glint of fire in his eyes when the boys became indignant . . . He leapt upon them with a quivering face . . . I knew that none of them would dare to attack me because of you, and I rescued him and showed him where his hat and bicycle were. It was because of that that we became friends and not as people maliciously said later that “we had formed a conspiracy of beloveds.” He was a very affectionate person . . .’

Gama bent his head with the silent shame of a memory of a year ago when he himself had mocked at Azad, crying out in the bazaar, ‘Hai Babuji,’ with a rude simulation of the tone of a lover sighing for his beloved.

‘He was fond of making speeches,’ Nur said, remembering an evening when Azad had lifted him out of his loneliness by his speech when he won the Ruchi Ram Sahni Declamation Prize, remembering the very colour, and the ring of those words of Azad’s, when with a face transfigured with eagerness he had summed up the universe.

“The whole world is in search of happiness,” he used to say,’ Nur began.

‘What then?’ Gama asked.

Nur paused embarrassedly on the edge of the words as they rang in his ears across the space of six years. He didn’t want to repeat them, as they might easily lend themselves to Gama’s mockery, and yet he couldn’t restrain himself.

‘The whole world is in search of happiness,’ he repeated, loudly, though he knew for certain from the light in Gama’s eyes that if he would not mock, he would certainly not be able to understand the whole meaning of those words. ‘The whole world is in search of happiness, all mankind

seeks the privileges of glory and power and wealth. But it is vulgar, I tell you, it is vulgar and stupid, the way in which society distributes her favours. The bitch has no morals. She yields herself to the embraces of any robber, brigand or cheating idiot who has secured for himself the traditional right to a vested interest. And these conscienceless swine have forgotten death, the cancer which grows slowly and surely within them, the cancer of their own decay, the germ of their own decay that they bear within them; and they shall be annihilated long before they have earned their pensions or retired to enjoy their ill-gotten gains . . .'

Nur paused to look at Gama and to see if he were listening to the words. Gama's attention was drifting but Nur went on nevertheless as if he were talking aloud to himself.

"But death comes to everyone, you will say, gentlemen," he had himself posed the question and then burst out with that querulous impatience which characterised him: "Yes, yes, death comes to everyone, but there are two ways of avoiding it. Some form a silent conspiracy to forget it; they are the imbeciles who build on graft and extortion and cunning and sheer might and so blacken their souls in the struggle for self-aggrandisement that they daren't enjoy the gains of their perfidy, and who therefore combine holiness with business like our Lallas, and talk of the things of the spirit even as they pass the hand of satisfaction over their bellies. And then, there are the men who are willing to accept a share in the total gain of the struggle for existence of the community, who want to organise the fight against nature, and who, though afraid of death, seek to conquer it . . . They will . . ." I don't remember the rest,' Nur said faltering and flushed but exhilarated as if his soul was dancing to the sound of that rhetoric with a recklessness which frightened him.

'You have said the truth, "Why did you drag me in the dust by making me an M.A.,"' said Gama quoting the beginning of Nur's poem against Azad.

'But really, really, believe me,' said Nur, 'I know he went mad because the torn and battered soul of India was struggling inside him, because he seemed to have understood the hopelessness of our lot. Really, he knew and suffered. We used to talk during our long walks, and it is curious that we felt we knew what was wrong with India and with ourselves, but couldn't do anything, and only sank deeper and deeper into despair. I must say I owe him a great deal . . .'

'Your illness, for instance,' said Gama.

'No, really,' protested Nur. 'It may be that he awakened me to the misery of our condition and made me suffer, but he also released all the stifled impulses I had never suspected in myself before . . .' And he was going to say that Azad had made him talk as he had never talked before, laugh, weep, read, think, feel, do things, live and breathe to a new rhythm, that he had broken all the barriers of self-consciousness that separated him, the confectioner's son, from everyone else, but he felt he was being naive and Gama was antagonistic. And yet he couldn't restrain himself from resuscitating the truth about Azad in an attempt to obliterate Gama's prejudice: 'He initiated me into the mysteries of poetry and philosophy,' he continued, sweating in the warm glare of the sun that burnt hotly outside now. 'It was really the way he talked. The passion, for instance, which he put into the reading of books, suiting his intonation to the slow gradation of Heine's love poems, to the lyrics of Goethe and Iqbal, to the broad histrionic gesture of Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet*, to the comic overtones of Dickens and the polished undertones of Flaubert, all names to you, as they were to

me, because the only literature I had known was the *High-roads of History* and Southey's *Life of Nelson* which I had read for the Matric, Rawlinson's *Selection of Essays*, and selections from Boswell's *Life of Johnson* which were the texts for the first and second year at college, and the cribs and questions and answers by Sheikh Abdul Qadir . . . I don't know where he got to know all these things . . .'

'Perhaps he didn't know them at all and it was really the way he talked,' said Gama laughing.

'No,' Nur said, 'he spent most of his time in odd corners of the college, while all of us just wasted our time ragging each other and gossiping as we sat in the fields outside the college buildings, during the free hours. You see, the boys who passed out from our school, specially Sarjit and Mathra, formed a group and they resented my friendship with Azad. But when I went and sat with Sarjit and company they only talked scandal about which boy was in love with whom, and what Professor had an alliance with which boy, and whether so and so shouldn't be ragged if he came that way, and what time they would get to the club for tennis and ping-pong. One day I decided to break away from that crowd and joined Azad who was sitting writing poetry in the dome of the college. And he opened my eyes to realities.'

'Childling, you are easily led astray,' said Gama, out of a clash of kindness for Nur, a contempt for Azad and a sense of inferiority. 'All those speeches of his are no use. We want a worker's raj just as it is prevailing in Russia, because the condition here will be as it is in Russia. There was a time when the Czar ruled Russia as the Badshah of Vilayat rules us. But one day he was shot down. And the peasants and labourers are ruling there. I have joined a tonga-wallahs' branch of the Labour Federation. The labourers of Hindustan are realising that the Sarkar can't go on....'

'Ohe bachu, you will be put into prison,' Nur said, laughing but earnest.

'I don't care for the limp lord,' said Gama with a swagger. But then he smiled embarrassedly as if he were not sure of himself.

Nur looked at a feather dropping from the top of a house across the shadow which cut the fierce sun outside, and he saw the shimmering of an azure and scarlet and yellow spectrum of light before him as he had often done lying in this bed. He felt the monotony of his existence and the ceaseless discomfort which his body had endured through the burning sun. The only high spots had been those baths in the canal with Azad when they were at college, or the times when they had lifted their heads towards the clotted greenery of the city gardens, specially when they had worked together for their finals. Otherwise, one commonplace day had followed another, the oppressive daylight sucking the strength out of one's bones and leaving one weak and tired and uninterested. It was perhaps the heat which made him so apathetic now. . . . 'But it is no use thinking of that,' he said to himself, 'it only makes me impatient.' And he turned to Gama, though he knew that the lengthy conversation was straining him.

'Have you heard how Azad is now?' he asked. 'And is he still in the asylum or has he been brought back to his father's house?'

'They say he was brought back from the asylum,' answered Gama, 'but he became violent again, raved profanities and obscenities and went on a hunger strike like Gandhi, demanding the release not only of all political prisoners but of all lunatics. . . .'

'You are joking,' Nur said, 'I suppose the Government brought influence to bear on his father. . . . If only he hadn't been such a fool, airing his opinions when even the

boldest spirits spoke in guarded undertones, but he was always so impetuous. . . .’ And he thought of the fiery, fanatical figure, at times like a sword that was never sheathed and destroyed everything in its way, and at others, loose and reckless, with a hearty laugh that made the world seem like a coloured bubble through its drumming thunders, and plunged one into a welter of confusion. Such a person, maddened by the life that surrounded him. Why didn’t he go on writing poetry? Why did he have to go into politics? But what self-respecting person, in India could help being political; who could help being affected by the sordid side of this tragic existence? He himself had kept his mouth shut,—but what had he got? Why, he had known as he left college that death lurked for him at the bend of the road. . . .

‘What are you thinking?’ Gama asked, turning uncomfortably to prepare for his departure.

‘Only these memories of our past,’ Nur said wearily.

‘But why do you feel like that this morning?’ Gama said. ‘You are as peevish as a stubborn child. Come, have a heart. You will be all right.’

‘My father wanted me to apply for admission to all the Government services,’ said Nur in an even, cynical voice, ‘to all the Government services, one after another, believing that since I had got a degree I had a free ticket for admission into the paradise of officialdom. And, in anticipation of my future position as a dignified member of the Government of India, he married me off. You should have seen the bustle and uproar in this house, the raucous laughter of the women of the gully as they sang filthy songs on the top of the house . . . And the crowds of guests gorging on the sweets, which the Chaudhri made, as they had never gorged before . . . You should have seen their paunches expand with the free food—and the paunch of Maulvi Shahab Din

knew no bounds. The noise and the din amid the sweating bodies left no room for one to stand or sit and it was sheer bedlam till the day when they led two sheep to be martyred before the divines and the witnesses . . . And I nearly died of shame to think what my college friends would feel. But of course, I had to go through the absurd ritual for fear that the Chaudhri would lose his temper in public . . . That poor, silly girl, Iqbal, was as much a pawn in the game which her father was playing with mine as I was in the game which my father was playing with her's ; her father thought that I would get into the Imperial Service with my first class degree, and my father thought that the daughter of a respectable veterinary surgeon would bring a good dowry. And both the players were deceived in deceiving each other. I could not get into the Imperial Service, and she only brought the prestige of her father's position, and her own self, for the dowry. But no one realised this until after I returned from the interview with the board which was to select candidates for the Imperial Forest Service. I never told you of this, but, through the confusion of hope and fear I spent myself like a fool, arranging the details of a plan to hide my origin because that was the only obstacle to my selection since I had passed well from the University. It was very funny . . . I could laugh at it now . . . I borrowed a suit from Azad and a brown, trilby hat, as the Chaudhri wouldn't believe that it was necessary to buy me a Sahib's rigout such as could compete with the Ranken and Company suits of the other candidates ; the Chaudhri didn't see why a suit was necessary at all since I was an M.A. Pass . . . But, of course, he didn't know that jobs are given by the Public Service Commission for smartness, general appearance, the possession of a good pedigree and according to the number of testimonials and recommendations from influential persons that a man may

have, more than for anything else. You should have seen me doing a dress rehearsal before going to Simla . . . '

'You must have looked like a Sahib, with your fair complexion,' commented Gama with admiration.

'Yes, I must confess,' said Nur flushing with fatigue and excitement, though his voice was still tuned to a smooth cynicism, 'for once I liked myself, whereas otherwise I had always been embarrassed by the number of lovers who made my life difficult at school and college. But the shame of knowing that I was the son of a confectioner, if I am to be honest, lessened the thrill of my own perfection. I never looked at my face in the glass afterwards without casting my eyes on my feet also immediately, like the peacock who weeps to see its ugly paws, and so I went . . . The journey to Simla—oh, I shall never forget that journey to Simla—I suppose it was the best thing I got out of it all. And the hotel, though since I knew that the Chaudhri had borrowed the hundred rupees for my expenses I couldn't enjoy the Angrezi food they gave us at the Hotel Bristol. And then the interview . . . The fear almost gave me dysentery.'

He paused, laughed nervously and reddened, then paled with shame.

'Go on,' Gama said impatiently. 'Tell me about that. Did you see the Lat Sahib?'

'Long before I saw the Lat Sahib, there were those sons of the Lats who were appearing before the board. You can't imagine the feeling I had when I entered the waiting room at Barnes Court, the office of the Governor of the Punjab: there were thirty other candidates, all splendidly dressed in expensive suits, all obviously the sons of the richest of fathers. And I had to make a terrible effort in my own mind not to betray my feelings during that long ordeal . . . '

He stopped short suddenly as if he felt suffocated with the lack of air in the low-ceilinged room and he moved

his legs about as if he wanted to jump out of bed, and escape into the open . . .

‘Then, what happened?’ asked Gama who had never been inside an Englishman’s house or talked to a European, except that he had been caned by Mercado, the Head Master of the Islamia School.

‘Oh, nothing very much,’ said Nur, his face twisting with a wry smile as if he were writhing with impatience inside and yet making a desperate effort to spit it out now that he had begun to vomit out his suffering. ‘The dramatic entry of me, in a complete funk, into the room where the commission sat, under the guidance of a peon in a gold-braided redcoat, who not only looked like a Rajah but behaved insolently like one; the seriousness of that moment, in which tables, curtains, papers, pens and an assortment of the Lat Sahib’s pipes swam in the void before my eyes with the glorious polished air of perfection surrounding them—and, of course, as if it just had to happen at that auspicious moment, the foolish blunder on my part in kicking a chair over and saying “Good Noon,” when I should have said, “Good Morning” . . .’

He blushed with embarrassment at telling Gama the story of his folly and exposing himself in the most sensitive, vulnerable parts of his character, and he lingered on the tremulous chords of that tense moment when his greeting was returned and when fear had taken possession of his body and set it trembling.

‘You know, that man Bailey was the son of a swine,’ he continued, after a little hesitation. ‘He was so alert in observation, one of those Englishmen who know us better than we know ourselves. My life went out of me as I saw his lean, wily face, lined on the cheeks as if he had been sucked up like an orange by that cow of a wife of his. I couldn’t understand the first question he asked me because

the soft tone of his measured speech seemed to me to be issuing from the steady stare of his eyes rather than from his mouth. I don't think his colleagues understood the burr-burr of his thin lips either, as they sat round him like statues ; the buffalo-faced Raja Ram Singh, the parrot-nosed Abdul Hamid Khan, and that lover of his mother, the Parsi, Sir Fredoonji. I could have laughed had I not been terror-stricken by the Lat Sahib, the long-necked pelican. I have never known the eternities of hell in this life as in those moments . . . '

He stopped again and drowsed through a suffering in which the present was interweaving with the past. And, for a moment, he listened to his heart drumming like a tom-tom in a monotonous rhythm.

' We ought to beat them with our shoes soaked in water, these illegally begotten, the limp lords as well as their sycophants ! ' said Gama, whose hooliganism had become the desperate sincerity of political passion roused by the struggle in the dust, the straw, the dung, the urine of the underworld in which he lived.

' Oh, what is the use ? ' Nur said as he turned his face away, tired and worn and grey, as if he were a creature from another world, a pale traveller from some distant country, who had a story to tell which he thought wouldn't be understood by any man of this land, and who was yet impelled by a curious instinct to unburden himself as if he would talk himself out of his frustration.

' Abdul Hamid Khan is a fanatical Muslim Leaguer, isn't he ? ' Gama asked.

' But I had known from the very beginning that I wouldn't be accepted,' Nur said in a hopeless, low voice, and stopped for a moment to consider how to convey his humiliation so as not to be unkind to himself and to expose his judges the more cruelly in order to revenge himself upon them. ' When

Raja Ram Singh asked me whether I had taken part in any "extra-mural" activity at college, I was so surprised at the buffalo-face mouthing a difficult word that I knew he had looked at the dictionary before coming there. And, frankly, I didn't know the meaning of the word myself, though I tried to make a vague guess and answered I had played tennis. And Abdul Hamid Khan's sympathy for his Muhammadan co-religionists refused to appear. Instead, the pig-eater laughed when Fredoonji asked me if my father was a confectioner, and I said: "Oh, no sir, he is the Chaudhri of the bazaar . . ." And so I walked away from the house of the limp Lord! And as the poet has said:

"I came out of your lane very insulted and humiliated."

He had a stale taste at the root of his palate as he ended on that note, and clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth to take away the dryness that the profusion of speech had produced. And he became conscious of the incommunicability of his feelings to Gama or to anybody, through the impatience that possessed him.

But even as he relaxed, his bitterness returned. Only, this time, instead of bursting out, he simulated the air of stretching his limbs and twisted about on the bed as if to exercise the fatigue that possessed him.

'You are very restless,' said Gama. 'Are your limbs tired? May I press your legs?'

'No, I feel slightly cold,' Nur said.

'I must be going now,' Gama suddenly said, listening to the air. 'Someone is coming up the stairs.'

'Nur, Nur, my son,' a heavy hoarse voice came with the puffing and panting of hosts of other women, and after a long moment, the short, square form of his mother-in-law emerged, shrouded in her flowing white cotton veil, followed by the shrouded ghosts of his wife and her aunt.

'Hai, hai,' they cried as they advanced, 'here is a man.'

And dropping the thick shrouds they had lifted to get a view of Nur, they rushed like fluttering, frightened hens towards a corner of the room.

Thereupon Gama turned and, without looking this side or that, rushed away, down the stairs, lest the modesty of the women be outraged by the penetration of his glance.

'Ohe Gamian !' Nur shouted, jumping from his bed till his skeleton bent over his ribs, 'Ohe . . .' And then, realising that his friend was out of hearing he coughed with the strain of the effort as if every sinew and fibre of his skin were snapping with the black cough which tugged at his tissues, and tore the very protoplasm of his life. He hung his head down and bit his lips and resigned himself to the tides of the cough that lashed his inside, till the convulsive spasms subsided into gasps of hiccupping breaths, and, bringing tears to his eyes, reddening his face a vivid red, threw up thick globules of blood and saliva like a string of tattered rags.

'Oh ! my mother, oh ! my mother,' he moaned through the acrid droolings of his pain, and, bending over the spittoon to throw off the last streaks of saliva in his mouth, strained his neck to breathe . . .

'Hai, hai ! Hai, hai !' the two elderly women shrieked, rushing towards him like vultures to their prey, and wailed : 'What will happen to us, what will happen to our Iqbal ?' while his girl wife stood at the foot of the bed, unhooded and helpless, with tears in her eyes.

Nur lay back with his eyes closed.

'Hai, hai ! Hai, hai !' his mother-in-law and her sister cried the more loudly, and, beating their breasts, howled and moaned till the old Grandma came slowly down the stairs and the women of the neighbouring houses rushed to the windows of their houses and began to shout, 'Is he dead ? Is he dead ?'

Nur was oppressed by the hysterical women, embarrassed and exasperated by the way they had lighted upon him when he was talking to Gama and broken the spell of his indignation against the world, which was forcing out of him the truths that he had felt but never expressed, which was making him recognise the necessity to tell life what he thought of it, now that he was to be deprived of it . . .

[The women's wails grew louder and shriller as his grandmother, his step-mother and the other women of the lane joined the chorus, the loudest of them adding to their shrieks a violent show of beating their breasts and smiting their foreheads in a rhythmic sequence attuned to the dirge of Hai, hai ! Hai, hai ! Hai, hai !

Nur hardened his jaws, stiffened his body, rose as if he were a brittle sword which wanted to hack their sprawling forms. But even as he lifted his head, he realised the futility of his rage against them as they were only practising a stupid convention that ordained the invocation of cries and shrieks and howls at the barest sign of death. He merely opened his eyes and waved his arm and said : ' I am not dead, I am not dead,' and collapsed in a heap.

' Be quiet, mother ! Be quiet, auntie ! Be quiet, grandma ! ' his wife was saying, as she struggled to stop them beating their breasts.

Nur looked at her. She seemed so helpless and shy that he felt sick to think he had ever hated her, she seemed so touching in her stupidity that he wished he could touch her now and make a contact which he had refused to establish between himself and her ever since they had been married, except in the moments of lust when she had docilely opened her legs to him.

' Come, mother, come auntie, come grandma, let him rest, come,' she was whispering, as she dragged them away one by one.

And she seemed to him tenderer than ever, some one who had hidden the light of her affection and her love in her own distress always, someone who had suffered and yet never shown it by word or deed. He suddenly recalled that he had cruelly and deliberately detached himself from her, because she was restrained by the convention of *purdah*, because she wasn't a fashionable woman who could put on a sari and walk out with him so that he could proudly show her off to the world as his wife, and he was full of remorse. For, during the days of his suffering, the dull, hot days which followed his degradation at the hands of the selection committee of the Imperial Forest Service, when he had walked the dusty roads from one Government office to another, in midsummer heat, and was insulted by the peons who refused to let him see officials because he couldn't pay them gratuities, she had followed him about tenderly, pathetically, fetching him cool drinks, and fanning him, pressing his head, rubbing his feet, soothing him as he sought to forget the weariness of his struggle for a job in an afternoon's sleep. And he had kicked her in the chagrin of his disappointments when, one day, during the period when he wrote a hundred applications and trudged a thousand weary miles to secure recommendations, during the days when he was weeping over the sneers of his relatives and the whispered mockery of the neighbours, she had yielded to him the perplexing knowledge of her pregnancy. And even then she had followed him about, like a devoted dog, worshipping him with her eyes, while he, in the panic of the fear of fatherhood that hung like an extra load on his already heavy-laden head, had frowned at her, refused to talk to her, and ignored her utterly, only charging at her now and then with the deliberate, violent, hard thrusts of a diabolical passion, as if he wanted to revenge himself against her, . . . and leave her high and dry in the writhings

of dissatisfaction without a word or a gesture of consolation. . . . And when she had proudly presented him with the gift of a little red-faced girl child who frowned and cried with closed eyes, he had felt like murdering her and the child and had gone out reading among the tall valerians of the city garden, its towers and its lawns.

‘What is it, my son?’ his grandmother pouted in a short-breathed drawl, as she came trembling and shaking back to him with the eternal tears in her eyes. ‘What is it then? May I be your sacrifice!’

Disturbed in the flow of his thoughts he looked at her in a dazed, absent-minded stare. Then he looked straight across her to where his wife stood after sending the other women upstairs and smiled a weak, helpless smile at her, wishing she would come and put her arms round him. But the slight, pale, irregular face of the girl was impassive, as if she were still frightened of him.

‘Iqbal,’ he said to summon her to him.

The girl lifted her innocent, downcast, brown eyes, but just at that moment the old woman began to stroke his head and murmur:

‘Go to sleep, my child, may I be your sacrifice! Those faint-hearted women frightened me.’

And moving aside with bent back she said, ‘Come, Iqbal, you come and rest too, my daughter. Come, my child, why didn’t you bring the baby?’

‘She is coming with my other aunt, grandma,’ Iqbal said, and then she looked towards her husband, as if imploring him with her eyes to call her again.

Nur’s eyes were averted, however. Someone had suddenly come in between them, some ugly, horrible fate which had intervened to isolate them, as it had always done, till their eyes had never met in the nakedness of a common light,

and now there was no building up of a private relationship between them, for now he was far removed from everyone.

If it had not been for the weight of responsibilities that had been piling up, he thought to himself as he saw her turn her back and follow grandma, if life had not buried him under the weight of his duties as a son, a husband and as a father, he might have loved her. . . . But poverty. . . . Oh ! how it had hardened him to life, how it had made him insensitive to the colours, the shapes, the forms of things, to the thoughts, the feelings of people, till he had no contact with anyone or anything and went irritably through the world without any perception of even the lumps of human existence, to say nothing of the subtle nuances of experience . . . poverty had come between him and her, how cruel it had made him to her, how stubbornly aloof and hard, so that now when he wanted to smile at her, to touch her, he had turned his eyes away, frozen and rigid, too proud and too ashamed to look at her, to yield. . . . And it was all his father's doing, . . .

'The son of Sheikh Pir Baksh has become a deputy collector, why can't you? The son of Sardar Kalyan Singh has become a sub-judge, why can't you?' Those words and the searching gleam of the Chaudhri's blood-streaked eyes had spread a terror in his soul till he had felt that every breath he breathed was in jeopardy, that every morsel of food he ate in the house was being watched. . . . And, afraid of the penalties he might have to pay for disobedience, he had put his heart and soul into the work necessary for the I.C.S. . . . But only he knew what he had gone through, waking up with aching eyelids in the dawn and getting down to work by the light of that kerosene lamp after washing his face in the water of amlas . . . sighing over every second page as he felt hopeless about his success in the competition. Those long summer months

of work. . . . He had felt like being in a prison of books. . . . The date of the examination hanging like the sword of Damocles over his head. . . . The misery of ten hours a day while all the world laughed, played and went about as usual. . . . He used to cover his head with wet towels to keep himself from going mad with the heat. . . . But he had known that this city would follow him, the streets of this city which had grown stale and horrible from the familiarity of being seen in the glare of the sun, day after day, for years, the streets of the city in which everyone knew him and whispered as he passed by, 'there goes Nur, the son of the confectioner who is an M.A. Pass, but who sits idle, with one hand on the other, and kills flies because he can't get a job.' And he knew that the flower-seller lane in Dhab-Khatikan of this city would direct his footsteps within its narrow purlieus by the children who sat excreting in the drain and the women who sat spinning or weaving garlands in lightless hovels; he would grow grey and die in his father's hateful house; fate had shattered his will to live, he really wanted to die and would never be able to escape; the foul breath he breathed here had poisoned him, so that he would take the bitter taste of its air about with him wherever he went till the poison would work its way slowly into his entire system and destroy him. . . . And, true to his prognostications, being a confectioner's son, he had only secured five marks in the viva and failed to get into the I.C.S. in spite of the other high marks. . . . And for months he had gone about living in a dead and lightless world with the winds of his father's temper raging against the dark walls of his mind. . . . And he had wished for release, longed for it, prayed for it, for each day he had awakened to recognise himself still breathing . . . till he had just ceased to care, gone beyond suffering to a listlessness and apathy like that of the first days of his illness, and

as if there was no meaning in anything, that one just drifted along anyhow, hoping for little, believing less, and committed to one's breath because one hadn't the courage to take one's life and end it all. Then, as the last remaining desire in life, he had wished between periods of hopelessness and blank despair and endless, bottomless misery for the gift of a little job, howsoever insignificant and humiliating, even the job of a peon if it were not in this city, so that he could earn a little bread for himself, Iqbal and the child. . . . But even this last little wish was not to be fulfilled easily. . . . Only days and unending days, morning, noon and night and the rub of his father's abuse and curses with every morsel of bread and every bite at a bone. . . . And months. . . . Oh where could one hide one's face? . . . Where could one go? . . . For when it came to the point one couldn't even go and become a boot-black in a different town as the news would spread, and there was still a lingering pride left in one's body, pride and the fear of being laughed at by the world, of being beaten and insulted by the Chaudhri. . . . One only had to eat a little food and this stupid pride came creeping back into one, the pride of one's manhood and the pride of being an educated, intelligent man, a Babu, an M.A. Pass. . . . The world was so snobbish, and one was so afraid of doing the wrong thing all the time. . . . 'Ohe, look at that Nur, the son of the confectioner; he fancied himself as a Babu, and now he has come down to his real state, become a coolie.' Any kind of manual labour was bad, was low and unworthy. It wasn't respectable to exert one's hands . . . the only izzat was in Government service. . . . And it wasn't only that the outside world believed this, the trouble was, if one was honest, that one had begun to believe in the snobbery oneself and was ashamed and embarrassed. . . .

Then, at last, after the exertions of his father-in-law,

after the abject crawling of his father with joined hands before that Bhai Bhachanga Singh, Inspector of Post-Offices, after all the influence brought to bear on Sheikh Pir Baksh, the Minister of Education, after all the recommendations, a clerkship in the Post Office at twenty rupees, and lucky to get it, as fifteen M.A.'s and a hundred and thirty-seven B.A.'s had applied for the same post, and but for the wire pulling, the favouritism for the Muhammadan and all the other influences, he would never have got it....

And then he lay still, listening to his own breath as if he were fascinated by his own naïveté, saying to himself, 'strange, it's my pain. . . . the pain I can't understand... of which I am going to die. Doesn't hurt really. . . I feel no different from what I have felt for months. . . a little better, a little worse. . . I must be dying. . . .'

The disappointment had done it, the routine of that office, working with dingy clerks, when the hours weighed like lead. . . . Selling postage stamps when he might have been an Imperial Service Officer. . . .

Was he ungrateful to feel doomed though ?

He looked into his heart with the inner eye and asked whether there was nothing in all the flux of his life that could have relieved his doom, no beauty, no tenderness, no faith, nothing but foiled desire. . . .

There was no answer.

Only a slight tremor turned into perspiration, and the weakness of his body was sucked by the heat, and the heavy eyelids closed in stupor, against his will, conjuring queer images : Tarzan was lifting the woman, her golden hair streaming. . . . Myrna Loy, perfect featured, and William Powell with a face like any He-man's. . . . Wonderful white houses in the English style. . . . Charlie Chaplin running after the new women he had seen on the corner of the restless street, all for love, a new love. . . .

He felt his heart throbbing with a helpless pity for himself, that he had never fallen in love, that he had not gone to England as a probationer of the Imperial Forest Service or the I.C.S. and come back to live a life in the English style, but lay completing the circuit of his life, fading into the unknown, into a future where there seemed to be a dearth even of past memories, where even the facts of his present state were slipping. . . .

'What had happened and what was happening? . . . Nothing . . . the Doctor will be coming soon . . .'

'It was my perverse pride that denied Iqbal's feelings,' he said to himself, 'and sent her away to her father's house . . . Even the playful smile on the face of Rashida whom my sperm had made, did not move me . . .'

In his recoil, he frowned and wriggled and then, turning in upon himself, said, 'Oh, it couldn't be helped . . .'

He listened intently to the silence, controlling his breath for a moment . . . The blood was pumping into the veins and the arteries seemed swollen and hard . . . Perhaps they were affected by the heat . . . But there was no doubt . . . Life was ebbing in him. It was a matter of days . . .

That first hæmorrhage had been a surprise to him . . . He had taken the shock calmly . . . But now it was no easy matter to sleep over it, for it might be a question of hours . . . He felt afraid.

But he mustn't get excited, else the Doctor would complain. He must be calm, above all things, calm. Look how calm he had been for days . . . Why, the Doctor had complimented him on his ability to notice each symptom of the disease.

He recalled the changing phases of his body, while he felt his pulse . . . One day . . . it was a month ago, he had felt bad, very bad . . . But then he had felt well,

and had even read Charles Garvice. It was curious how, when he was reading books, the festoons of clothes, the hurricane lamp hanging by the wall, and all the jumble of things which looked ugly in the ordinary light assumed a certain grandeur. The next day he had not been so well, and he felt apathetic to everyone and everything. His breathing had been heavy as it was now, and his fever was rising, and he had moaned exactly as he had done to-day. Perhaps he was trying grimly to hold on to himself, but what was the use, the cure was outside himself, and why couldn't he get out of the prison of his own broodings . . . But there was nothing else to do . . .

It was no use looking to anything outside of himself for help . . . For he felt so exhausted, lying there. Why couldn't he wrestle with every moment and delay the end for a few months, for a few years . . . ? By prayer, for instance. That had given him whole days of good health . . . What a boon it was; he had liked people. 'I wonder if the attacks of hæmorrhage come because I don't pray any more . . . ' But that was stupid! What was he thinking about? Neither God nor the Devil could help him . . .

A gleam of kindness coloured his face for a moment, then changed to a frown, and he turned his tired body again, and shrank back like a snail into his own skin.

That hæmorrhage, a fortnight ago, was the worst he had had. His disease had surely begun to overpower him then. He had been terrified . . . But, after all, it could not have done him much harm. It couldn't have done, because he had felt life in his body . . . Why, the blood had rushed to his cheeks and that ghastly pallor of months had gone . . . But for the chill that he caught at dawn last Thursday . . . How he had trembled: always he had trembled when he had had fever, even as a child, a soft

tremor went shivering through the nerves of his body. The cold had affected him badly, because he had had a terrible hæmorrhage on Saturday . . . How helpless he had felt till the Doctor prescribed arsenic . . . But on Sunday his depression had lifted. He could rise again from the ashes . . . Yesterday he had felt that too, and to-day . . . He was tired perhaps, but he would get up, in spite of the hæmorrhage, this morning. Would he though? Could he? . . . after months of sinking life? Could he? Hark, there was someone . . .

He listened.

There was the Doctor. They were Captain Pochanwala's footsteps. He must ask him. He must get ready, not shuffle the clothes, lie still . . .

'Well, Mr. Nur, how are you this morning?' asked Captain Pochanwala superciliously, advancing into the room with an urbane manner which he seemed to have cultivated specially to suit the distinctive fawn-coloured polo topee which he alone of all the Indians in Amritsar wore with his well-cut suit. Being a Parsi, he perhaps thought himself superior to all the other Indians who had begun to wear English clothes.

Nur strained to say, 'Good morning,' but his father appeared behind the Doctor, and, somehow, he felt ashamed to be speaking English in the presence of the Chaudhri, as it would seem like showing off.

'Flushed, very flushed, breathing bad,' the Doctor said and fixing his gaze on Nur he asked, 'How is the cough?'

'Better,' said Nur, and he saw his father going upstairs, presumably to fetch the money for the Doctor's fees, since Captain Pochanwala didn't believe in credit, and had asked for his remuneration even when he had arrived too late to cure Nur's mother.

'Let us see the temperature!' the Doctor said, screwing

up his eyes and nose as if he really didn't want to come into contact with his patient.

And, while Nur was drawing his hand out of the sheet, Captain Pochanwala looked contemptuously round the room, and then put his hand on the boy's forehead.

'Very hot, very hot, very hot!' he said, 'What have you been doing to excite yourself this morning?'

'Nothing, Doctor,' said Nur.

Captain Pochanwala was applying the stethoscope to his patient's heart, and didn't wait for the boy to answer.

'Hum . . . ' he said rather abstractedly, and, twisting his lower lips coldly and looking at the boy with knitted brows and eyes turned sideways, 'that intractable lung . . . any hæmorrhage this morning?'

'No,' said Nur, then correcting himself, 'Yes.'

Captain Pochanwala looked quizzically about him and contemplated the purple glow on the boy's face for a moment . . .

'There is some medicine there, isn't there?' he asked and then turning to the table himself confirmed, 'yes.'

'How is he, Doctor Sahib?' asked the Chaudhri coming down the stairs, grim and heavy.

'I am afraid Mr. Nur has been exciting himself,' Captain Pochanwala replied, putting away his stethoscope. 'He should remain absolutely quiet. That medicine in the bottle will do for some days . . . ' Then he took out his watch and moved towards the door, beckoning the Chaudhri.

Nur didn't know whether the Doctor had made his gesture to tell his father confidentially that it was the end or whether to make sure of his fee. From the way in which he extended his hand, it seemed he was just a little embarrassed at the heartlessness of his demand for his fee; but then, as he took the five rupee note, he whispered something to the Chaudhri.

'Will you come in again this evening, Sarkar?' asked the Chaudhri as the Doctor was adjusting his hat so as not to knock it against the narrow door of the stairs.

But Captain Pochanwala affected not to have heard and, screwing up his nose, opening his eyes wide, had explored the comparative darkness.

'What did the Dagdar say?' Nur heard his grandmother ask from where she came scrambling down the stairs again.

'Nothing very much,' the Chaudhri replied casually unheeding. Then he turned to Nur and asked sneeringly: 'What have you been doing to yourself, ohc, Gentermana?'

'How much more alive his patients are to the case histories of their ailments,' said Nur, as if he were talking aloud to himself, 'than Captain Pochanwala. He thrives on the snobbery of his position as an ex-I.M.S. Officer. But he only had a temporary commission during the war, and doesn't know any other medicines except quinine and tincture of iodine.'

'What have you done,' the Chaudhri burst out, red with rage, 'that you should be critical of your elders? You wasted hundreds of rupees of my hard-earned money, you son of a bitch, and you couldn't even get a job to feed yourself and wife and child? Why don't you die of shame, you lover of your mother, and rid me of the responsibility you have imposed on me so long? When will you die, you dog? How long will you go on prolonging the agony of your poor old grandmother? You have disgraced me and given a bad name to your family! Go to hell and die and be done with it, you wretch . . .'

'My son, my son, what are you saying?' the old woman appealed coming towards the Chaudhri with lifted, supplicating hands.

'Go to hell and be done with it, die and rid us all of this responsibility . . . ' the Chaudhri shouted raising his voice,

‘Die and give me peace,’ and he stood swaying with anger as he warded off his mother with a flourish of his hand.

Nur just lay bewildered on the bed, dazed by his father’s outburst, incapable of realising the full force of the Chaudhri’s anger, as if all his nervous energy were exhausted and he were completely unaffected by, indifferent to, things, except that his legs were shaking.

‘Why don’t you speak?’ the Chaudhri, rushing to the bed of his son, said, now tenderly.

‘Oh! forgive me, father, forgive me,’ Nur hissed, sinking farther and farther away from the reach of his father’s hand, trembling and shaking and with the light of an abject terror in his eyes . . . ‘Oh, forgive me, forgive me . . .’

‘Is this the fruit of all my labour for you?’ the Chaudhri said alternately glistening with rage and patting Nur’s forehead.

For the slightest moment, everything was still. Then the old woman began to soothe her son’s form with her wrinkled fingers, saying, ‘Calm, yourself, child, calm yourself, he is ill . . .’

‘What has he done for the money I spent on his education?’ the Chaudhri shouted, his face twisting with impatience. ‘What has he done, except spoil my izzat! Is this the reward I get for bringing him into the world, for looking after him, educating him! Why can’t God give me death and rid me of the affliction?’

As he stood there, however, his eyes fell on his son’s frightened bent head, and he ground his teeth with a revulsion against himself, and wished he could take the boy in his arms, but he felt the slightest gesture on his part would send the boy away from him and he had been too hardened since the day when Nur was a child to bend his body and touch his son to communicate the remorse he now felt. ‘Give him some food, mother,’ he with a heavy heart

and extricating himself from his mother's grasp rushed down the stairs, saying, 'Give him some essence of chicken . . .'

'Wait, my son, wait, child,' said the old woman hobbling after him. 'Son, you haven't eaten anything yourself . . .'

But the Chaudhri had gone stamping down the stairs and was out of reach of her entreaties and prayers.

'And now, now,' the old woman wailed. 'He hasn't even eaten a crust of bread, and he went to work at dawn on an empty stomach . . . Hai . . . what shall I do?' And she waited near the door of the stairs, torn between following him and coming to Nur. Then she returned towards Nur, who was slipping back into bed, pale and hushed, and, stretching her arms, said: 'Don't take any notice of what he says, my son; he is worried on account of you and over-wrought, and he loses his temper . . . I am sure he is sorry at heart, and he loves you . . . And now he will be hungry. But never mind, I shall get you your soup and take his meal to the shop for him . . .'

She shambled and shuffled and hurried upstairs.

Nur lay still petrified and looking on through misty eyes at the broad naked heat of the sun. His mind seemed to be closed. Only, there was a dry taste at the base of his tongue, a parched feeling in his throat, mixed with a vague sense of betrayal. His face which had changed colour so often, since the visit of the Doctor was set in a livid mould as if it were plastered with a mud mask. His brain wheeled dizzily, and he moved his head this side and that, as if he wanted to stir it into thought . . . But his eyes just stared hard into the air and he could not notice a thing in the crowded room . . .

Then, after a moment, he felt a weight rise from his belly to his chest, and stand there pressing down on his ribs. He breathed hard and turned on his side and, twisting his body, moaned as if to summon all the fragile

cells of his body to come and look at the new wound that his father's hard words had inflicted on him. But he felt an increasing weakness in his legs and thought he was fainting. His limbs seemed like loose streamers falling away from his leaden trunk. The drowsy shade of the room in which he lay seemed to exaggerate his contours, and he felt as if he were breaking. His will relaxed and weakened . . .

And yet the bitterness of his father's cruelty lingered . . .

This was the man . . . this was the man, who was responsible for his very existence, this was the man who had loved him so when he was a little child in arms, with dark eyes and a fair complexion, when he was full of mischief and learning to toddle and speak . . . It seemed strange and unbearably tender; but his earliest memory, almost his first vivid recollection, was the Chaudhri laughing heartily as he flung him into the air playfully and kissed him at each fall, fairly smothering his face with kisses . . . After that, except now and then during the years, he had only worn a serious expression on his round, rugged face . . . But he had been proud even then of his father's hefty, handsome form. Only afraid, so afraid, that he remembered only a very few occasions when he had lifted his eyes to face him . . . Although he must admit, he was also attracted by the magnetic presence of the man; in fact, the war between these two emotions in him had always led to awkward collisions, and he had faltered . . . stumbled . . . stammered . . . perspired whenever he had to say anything to the Chaudhri . . . His father had towered over him, simple, and stubbornly upright . . . Was it because of his mother's death that this difference had arisen between them? Anyhow, it was unfair . . . Was it because I, an only son, had been the cause of anxiety to him . . . I am a failure indeed . . . But why, oh why, did he have to drag

me into the dust by educating me? How could a parent expect to get a return for the money he had spent on his child? Why should he have expected anything? You produced me for your own pleasure . . . You produced me for your own pleasure, do you hear, and you didn't consult me beforehand! Why didn't you . . .? If you had to hate me . . . And tell me afterwards . . . Why did you? I didn't want to be born . . .

He felt his soul rising in revolt and he rolled in a frenzy. His eyes saw the injustice of it all and welled with tears.

'Oh God, why . . . did he produce me if he had to be so hard to me . . .? Oh, why did he have to educate me, why did he not let me sit at the shop and follow his own profession . . .? Oh why did he, why did he, why did he . . .? Why did he insist on my passing my M.A. if he had to blame me for it afterwards . . .? Oh why did he drag me . . .?'

No one seemed to hear his cries and, in order not to waste his suffering on the empty air, he stifled his moans and with averted eyes still filled with tears, thought of the injustice more coolly.

'Whose fault is it? He gave me all this education to flatter his own vanity and not because he meant me to learn anything. And was it my fault that I couldn't get into any of the Services? Was it not because I was his son, the confectioner's son, who couldn't get any recommendations? For had I not always worked hard and always been top of my class? Of course, he couldn't understand what books or anything meant. But had I not always passed in the first division? Did he not hate me because, not having flourished himself, he could not see his own son fail to ascend the pinnacles of glory so that he could call the faithful to come and witness the success of his investment . . . And he hit me . . .'

His tears ran down his cheeks and he was convulsed with sobs . . . 'He has worked so hard in the grime and the dirt of the shop, the wretch has become surly and bad tempered serving his impatient customers,' he thought. 'But it was swinish the way he treated me, keeping a strict watch on everything I did. I must return home at seven. I must not consort with this man and that man. I must be respectful to his friends, his trusted friends, the pious practitioners of five prayers a day, who were always trying to kiss me and asking me to come and sit in their laps . . . And I dared not complain because they threatened to tell him that I didn't go to say prayers at the mosque regularly . . . What right had he to fill me with fear . . . It was fear that had kept me from telling him openly about things . . . fear and his ignorance, for how could I have explained to him that Darwin said there wasn't a God, and Huxley was an agnostic . . . What was Darwin to him and who was Huxley ? . . . '

But he felt he was being naive, thinking like that . . . Only the blows rankled.

'Oh ! God, oh ! my God . . . Oh ! my mother, my mother, come and take me . . . I am burning, I am bursting, I am torn . . . Oh come, they have crushed me, they have ruined me, they have broken me, they have made me ill, they have destroyed me, your son, and there is none in this hovel, there is none who loves me at all . . . Oh, I was an orphan, my mother, I was an uncared for orphan when you died . . . Why, oh why did you have to bring me into the world if you had to leave me . . . ? Oh why did he have to have me if he had to loathe the very sight of me . . . ? Why did he have to do that, why . . . ' But he couldn't go on. His cries were becoming louder and the reiterated hiccups of his sobs were choking him so that he would have to shriek to be heard even by his own ears. And he

didn't want the women upstairs to come down, because he would be too ashamed to face anyone. And yet he could not control the passion that he had let loose in himself, the anger, the resentment, the grief and the longing that lay choking him now . . .

He turned on his side and, suddenly, his whole form was numbed, as if he had been struck in the heart.

For a moment he writhed in a paroxysm. The frenzied fire in his head drummed through his temples, the hot tears of remorse ran from his eyes, and his hard teeth ground a swooning sigh.

His throat suddenly brought up a profusion of saliva rich with blood, and he lurched over to throw it into the spittoon.

He kept his head hanging over the streaks of dribbling blood and gaped weakly into the spittoon for a confirmation of his dread. The streaks of blood clotted the edge of the brass bowl. There was a coloured space before his eyes. He was sure now . . .

'O mother,' he cried and clutched the sheet tight. His brain was faint, the light of his eyes dimming slowly like an invisible anguish, and his mind blended in a soundless void. He opened his mouth to call his grandma. But he felt the nerves of his body relaxing, as if the pain were being pressed out by the inexorable advance of Death . . .

'Nur, my child, Nur, wake up and drink this essence,' his grandmother said, coming towards the bed . . .
'Nur . . .'

His face looked strange.

She stood fixed to the ground. Then she struggled on heavy feet to the bed and shook him with trembling fingers, calling the while, 'Nur, Nur, Nur my son, awake . . .'

But his face turned and hung limply aside . . .

‘Hai, hai!’ she lifted her voice and cried. ‘Hai hai! Hai hai!’ And she struck the palms of her hands on her breasts, on her forehead, on her face, and moaned and howled and tore her hair as she fell across his neck.

The women on the top storey came screaming down, beating their breasts, their thighs, their foreheads, their cheeks and their breasts again and cried, ‘Hai, hai! Hai hai! Hai hai!’

The women of the neighbourhood rushed and, entering the room, began to beat their bodies deliberately, crying and wailing, ‘Hai hai! Hai hai!’

The body of Death lingered on the sick bed.

Appearance and Reality

(To Goronway Rees)

SIR HASAN ALI was surprised at the cordiality of the man’s greeting as he looked out from the ferry-boat which was carrying him ashore to Gibraltar from the steamer. A South Indian, or Ceylonese, by the look of him, Sir Hasan thought. But where had he met him before? Because the man was smiling and waving his arms with the familiarity of one who might have been his friend since the day when he wore a strip of cloth to hide his fore and aft. The warm-hearted Punjabi in Sir Hasan, however, made him return the compliment with a broad sweep of his right arm, and with an effusive ‘Adab arz.’ The English ladies and gentlemen in the ferry-boat looked askance at him and Sir Hasan became somewhat self-conscious and sought to

resume the dignified pose which he had begun to cultivate ever since he had been made a Knight Commander of the Star of India.

Nervously he rubbed his short French beard at the chin and then smoothed the new suit he had had made at Ranken & Co., Simla, for this, his first, trip to England. He had found it a great strain to keep up appearances on board the ship throughout the voyage. Because at the mature age of sixty he found it difficult to practise the gymnastics which ordinary European behaviour demanded, what with having to keep the crease of the trousers in which his awkward legs, used to the loose salwars, could contain themselves with great difficulty, specially as the braces tugged at his bunch of piles, and the armour-like waist-coat and jacket, and the boots which strapped his feet used to the old style open Indian shoes of the nineteenth century. Still, he had accustomed himself to all these inconveniences and knew that, in spite of his doubts, he carried himself with the dignity and precision expected from India's ambassador at large to the Western world. There was a great deal in a title and in properly made clothes. Sir Hasan was sure that even a small cloth merchant from Bazaar Sabunian in Amritsar could almost pass off as an Englishman if he had been honoured by the Angrezi Sarkar and gone in for a few fittings at Ranken's. Whereas he himself had, at least, been used to shaking hands with the Deputy Commissioner Sahib and other England-returned men for a generation as head of one of the biggest carpet manufacturing firms of Amritsar, and as Vice-President of the local Municipal Committee. Only he was not sure whether the Fez cap he wore was an advantage or a disadvantage: he had felt that he ought to keep his native head-dress in order to keep the prestige of his religion intact, but on the voyage he had inclined

towards the use of a topee in the heat of Africa. But it was all a question of izzat, and propriety and his mission required that he should put up a good show . . .

Before Sir Hasan had finished his sartorial speculations, however, the ferry-boat splashed the blue-green water against the wharf and his compatriot greeted him with 'Salam Elekam' as if he were his twin brother in Islam. To a devout Muslim like Sir Hasan, the 'Wa Eikam Salam' was as automatic as 'How do you do?' to an Englishman. But though he had meant no more than conventional politeness, he found himself committed to a cordial handshake with the stranger, in spite of the fact that the first close look at the man made him smell 'something black in the pulse.' Other passengers were about and he could not be cool to the man now that he had shown a certain amount of warmth.

'We have a common friend in His Highness the Aga Khan,' the stranger said with the bluff of a broad smile on the full lips of his dark face, which was handsome in spite of the deep, degenerate circles round his eyes, the lean and hungry hollows of his cheeks. And then he added in a furtive whisper, 'My name is Samuel Vijayaragavacharia.'

'I am pleased to meet you—what did you say your name was?' Sir Hasan said with a certain hauteur and contempt in his manner.

'They call me Sammy here, Sir Hasan; so you call me Sam.'

'Oh, so you know my name?' Sir Hasan asked, surprised but correct.

'Who doesn't know of your fame, Sir Hasan?' Sammy said. And then he lied, 'The Aga Khan often mentioned you in his conversation with me as one of the older Muslim Statesmen of Northern India.'

Sir Hasan was too puffed up by this flattery to question

the man's friendship with the Aga Khan or to be put off by the dirty collar which he wore, or his unkempt hair under the pork-pie felt hat, or the shabby suit, and they walked along together towards the gateway where the policeman was inspecting passports.

'So you have been here a long time?' he said, indifferent and worldly, after he had shown his papers and emerged on to the road where a number of taxis were lined up.

'Oh yes, I know the Continent very well,' said Sam obsequiously. 'Too well, in fact, if you see what I mean!' And he cocked his left eye as he pronounced the last sentence, and even before Sir Hasan could answer or acknowledge that significant gesture, he added, 'I would like to show you La Linea, the Spanish part of the town. I could take you to places where none of these *bahin chud Angrez* log have been.'

'So you speak Hindustani also, though by your name you come from the South!' Sir Hasan said humorously, shocked at the sound of the vulgar abuse, but pliant.

'We are all Asiatic brothers,' Sammy said, 'Wherever we come from. These *Salé, harami*, think of all of us as black men . . . Actually, I come from Jafna . . .'

Sir Hasan surveyed Sam's presence dispassionately for a moment. He knew that he was in the hands of a guide, a tout or a pimp, and he knew the other passengers around knew this. But he couldn't back out now. For Sammy had hit him below the belt, as it were. Firstly, he had aroused that suspicion and hatred for the Government in him which, in spite of his long and loyal association with the Sarkar, was a major instinct in the Indian. And, secondly, he had touched those desires which even the devout Muslim in him had not been able to suppress through a life-time of assiduity in the performance of physical (or spiritual?) jerks five times a day.

‘What will you show me?’ Sir Hasan asked with a lascivious smile.

‘All the houris promised to the faithful in heaven,’ said Sammy with a laugh emboldened by the softening of Sir Hasan’s manner. And he hailed a motor with a flamboyant lordly gesture.

‘Are, are, wait!’ Sir Hasan’s caution and respectability returned. ‘What is the fare to the town and what will you charge?’

‘Oh Sir Hasan, come, you are my brother,’ said Sam, effusive and deliberately vague. ‘I don’t see many of my countrymen here in exile. I will take you to see the sights and if you are pleased you can pay me what you like.’

Sir Hasan was totally disarmed by this generous offer. He even lost all the inhibitions which generally kept him from doing the wrong thing in the presence of the English passengers. He did not look before or after as he got into the taxi. Fortunately, he saw two first-class English passengers get into a similar car with a lady and he felt he had the necessary sanction for courage in the casual way they conducted themselves. But, as the car began to move and Sammy gave orders to the driver, in a language which seemed to him to be French though it was Spanish, his careful, timid soul which had never ventured so far, bubbled inside his stomach.

‘You know that the boat leaves at exactly nine o’clock this evening,’ he said. ‘So don’t let us go further than the main bazaar of the town.’

‘I know the time your boat leaves, Sir Hasan, but if you only want to see the bazaar I’ll have to ask the driver to change his direction,’ Sammy said sternly.

‘No, no, let us go where you like—only I must get back in time!’ said Sir Hasan flustered. For he felt the chance of seeing the houris, out of sight of all the eyes which had

in the past prevented his enjoyment of this pleasure, slipping away.

‘Then you are safe in my hands,’ said Sammy with a direct look in his eyes which became full of sinister meaning as it became fixed for a moment in the hollows of his eyes.

The shadows of evening were spreading slowly over the blue sea which took colour from the bluer sky. And as the taxi sped along the dusty road to La Linea, Sir Hasan surrendered to the twilight, and to Sammy, almost as if he had been hypnotised. For though he felt a certain trepidation in his small heart, the deeper urges in his spine seemed to incline him to the warmth of the Spanish peninsula with memories of the heroic Moors as they sped across it, tasting of its wines, raping its flesh, cutting its corn during the conquests. For a minute or two he had qualms about having missed performing the evening prayers, but then he rationalised his mood of wonder by contemplating the ineffable mystery behind everything created by the One God, of whom Muhammad was the Prophet, and by assuring himself that he was, to-day, earning the reward for all his prayers in the past—he was going to meet the houris!

As the taxi dropped them in a dark side-street in La Linea by a shop full of cigarette lighters, Sir Hasan looked questioningly at the tall, silent figure of his guide, and searched his soft, dark, shifty eyes. Sammy gave him his arm even as he rang the bell of the house and assured him again that he was in safe hands . . .

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As Sir Hasan came to from the sleepy stupor which seemed to have descended on him in the arms of a houri in heaven, he found himself very much on earth. He was lying outside the door of that house in the side-street where he fancied he had entered. A wave of nausea passed through his stomach as he felt for his wallet in the pocket of his

trousers and found that it wasn't there. He beat his head and burst out weeping. But his fez cap protected his head. Suddenly he thought of searching for the wallet in his jacket. He found that he only had his waistcoat on; the jacket of the Ranken & Co.'s suit was missing. He pushed his eager, trembling hands into the waistcoat pockets, but they were empty . . .

He gave one piercing groan and, with wide open mouth poised for shouting, raised himself up from the threshold and struck the doors with empty hands. The hard wooden door only thudded back with a hard answer.

In the layers of anguish beneath the bottomless misery in his soul he remembered Sam; and the assurance that the traitor had given him at this very spot. Without a doubt he was the pimp of the place because, when he had rung the bell, a little aperture had opened within the great door and a face had poked out.

Sir Hasan rang the bell and waited, but there was the same hard answer: the thudding wood echoing a dull thud.

He looked round. There was no one in the street. Only the glass of the cigarette lighter shop reflected back the radiance of the sky on the corner.

A motor car rushed past in the main street a hundred yards away. Sir Hasan called aloud 'taxi' and ran towards it, only to find himself in an empty street.

Suddenly the thought struck him: the ship. What time was it? His hands automatically reached for the gold chain adjusted to the Hunter watch in his waistcoat pocket. Neither the chain nor the watch was there.

Blind with rage and hot tears he ran towards a street which looked out to sea—But half way he realised that the harbour may not be visible from there, and that, anyhow, it was morning while the boat was supposed to have left the previous night.

His heart sank and he ran back to the main street in a panic almost as he had done when he had got lost in Mori Ganj as a child. But the heavy buttocks of his respectable body refused to go forward at such speed.

He wiped the sweat off his face and recited a few verses of the Koran, suitable for frightening off jinns in the dark. Then he paced along, his eyes bulging out to catch sight of a human being.

A man with an apron tied round his middle was throwing some bones to a dog by a shop where a few men were seated under an awning, apparently a café.

Sir Hasan walked towards the café. But, even as he advanced, the fear assailed him that he didn't know the language of the place, or any European language except English, and might not be able to make himself understood. His fears were justified, for as he said aloud, 'Ship! they take my wallet! Coat! Watch chain!' with copious gestures of his arms, the proprietor-waiter waved him to a chair in the most perfunctory manner and only asked: 'Café au lait?'

Sir Hasan was desperate and turned to the two or three men who were eating rolls and drinking coffee. They turned their heads and merely whispered to each other: 'Negro.'

When the proprietor brought a cup of coffee and put it on a table and said, 'Something, something, Monsieur?' to Sir Hasan, the Knight Commander of the Star of India walked away in disgust, followed by the curses and contemptuous jeers of the whole café.

He recalled he had seen a police guard at the gateway to La Linea as he travelled in the taxi last night with that wretch Sammy Ragavacharia. He began to walk back towards it. His feet dragged almost as if he had on the old native style shoes which he used to wear in the days before he became a public figure; his legs behaved as if

they were loose in a tehmet ; his body sweated as though he had set off canvassing in the market one early morning, in the manner of the days when he was his own firm's traveller . . . What had happened, he asked himself ? The air, the sky, the earth to-day were the same as yesterday, but he felt other than the assured traveller, the ambassador on his way to England. What had happened ?

Everything had happened. 'I have been betrayed,' the answer came back from the surviving sense of dignity in his being. 'Cheated and robbed and insulted,' he protested. 'My wallet gone and—'

But he didn't dare to look at himself, he didn't have the courage to ask himself what had happened. Only, he was eager to repair the damage. And he hurried to the frontier, feeling desolate and forsaken, utterly lost and exhausted.

The Spanish gendarme passed him on to the British sergeant, after giving Sir Hasan a contemptuous look, and the Tommy, who was lighting a cigarette, said : ' Now, mate, what is the trouble ? '

Sir Hasan began to tell him his story with all the pent-up passion of futility.

' Now, don't get excited,' said the Englishman. ' I am not taken in by people like you. If you want to go and sell your bloody carpets in Gibraltar you'd better go and get a proper passport from the Spanish authorities and I'll let you across the frontier . . . '

Sir Hasan protested vociferously that he was not a carpet seller, and lost his temper. The Punjabi passions in him welled up at the insult to his izzat and he stormed and raved at the sergeant like a lunatic.

' Orders,' was all the Sergeant would say, shrugging his shoulders. And when he couldn't make his excuse heard above the loud and filthy abuse which Sir Hasan was casting

on him, he suddenly thumped his rifle on its butt end and stood menacingly.

If he had had any chance of proving who he was to the stupid sentry, Sir Hasan had now altogether lost it by his violent abuse of the man. And, frightened, broken and in a rage that could call Allah to open up the earth and engulf him in the fires of hell, he turned back.

But on a word from the British sentry, the Spanish gendarme caught Sir Hasan by the nape of his neck and shouted at him : ' passport.'

As Sir Hasan wrung his hands in vain, the gendarme took him towards a dungeon and threw him into a black hell worse even than any cellar in the basement of his own home in Mori Ganj, Amritsar, where he used to consign his erring servants now and then.

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On the afternoon of that day an inquiry came through from Headquarters in Gibraltar, which incidentally revealed the identity of Sir Hasan Ali to the Sergeant of the guard at the frontier of La Linea. And, needless to say, the Englishman secured the release of the great man from the Spanish police after some difficulties and apologised profusely to the dignitary himself.

Was he mad ? Sir Hasan asked himself as the car swung across the rock to the house of the Governor of Gibraltar. Or had he really been changed by the shock of this incident into the undignified person he had once been in his early life . . . But then he became aware of the difficulties he would have in conducting himself with dignity at the house of the Governor without his jacket and in trousers which had been creased by the ill usage he had suffered the previous night. His small, humble soul shrank at the prospect of having to keep up appearances again . . .

Boots

(To Denys Val Baker)

LOOKING through the haze of early sunshine, stabbed by the rays that probed every corner of her dark soul, scorched by the fire of heaven, the pinpoint of moisture trailing on the tip of her snub nose, she sat tying the last knot on the bundle of her personal belongings with hands that quivered like birds who sense the hunter's approach.

There was as yet no sound in the gulley outside as she applied her ears to listen and she hurried, hoping to make a clean getaway before the creditors arrived. But the lower knot of the sheet in which she had bound her clothes was too thick to allow a similar knot on top. And in the emptiness of the courtyard beyond her, she could hear a low rumbling—was it the drumming of the elements? She could see the undulations of fluorescent screens of many-tinted clouds cavorting like demons of destruction—could it be the jinns dancing round her husband's spirit? She could feel caverns, deep chasms, between her hands—may be the jaws of Death opening up to receive her . . . ?

Alone.

A whole æon of sorrow stretched between her and the nebulous distances where he had travelled, earth and sea and snow and mud, all a grey nothingness, only swinging to the lilt of the tune :

'Where have you gone, O my exile!'

Her eyes fell on the boots which she had carefully put on one side. They were too big to be packed into the bundle and too sacred to be left behind—those boots of the lord

and master which she had put by the mandala where her brass idols stood, those boots which more than the gods had connected her to Jai Singh and which had thus become the incarnation of the Supreme God in her queer universe.

What a slender thread holds us together ! It is a song or a pair of boots that makes the curve of remembrance on the taut emptiness of the lonely heart. And the wise concede wood and stones to all those who cannot see afar.

The whole of Gobindi's life hung by the shoe laces of those artillery boots which Jai Singh had left behind in a fit of absent-mindedness on his embarkation leave. And she assembled them together and laid them on the top of the bundle so that they dangled on each side. Then she got up to see how the land lay and what chance there was of her getting away.

Like a shy gazelle she darted across the courtyard and stood behind the tattered length of jute cloth which curtained her off from the world. The thunderous drumming, which was her thumping heart, spread its wings on the air, and she gasped for breath. She recalled that that was what she had always felt like when she had come, a newly-wed bride, to his house and when, evading her mother-in-law's eyes, she used to go and wait at the door to hear if her husband was approaching. For, though she could not outrage the convention which said that a woman must never show affection, in secret she had harboured a wantonness in her bosom that was always bursting to embrace Jai Singh. He had been equally shy before his mother's glare, but he used to steal back in the afternoons when the old woman was having her siesta and smiling, silent but light-hearted, he would take her in his arms and lay her down in the verandah. . . . When the old woman had died he was already away fighting in the war, and they had never been able to give themselves to each other in the fullness of

passion. Secret, like the scent of roses which he had brought her from Amritsar, was his love for her, but it lashed her body like a forest fire. . . . Secret, like the failing breath of her body, was her love for him, but it had wrapped his soul so that he overstayed every leave. Secret, secret, were the scars he had left on her soul in parting....

‘ Where have you gone, O my exile ! ’

The tune haunted her until she felt faint.

But she lifted the jute cloth aside ever so gently and peered into the alley way. “ No one . . . but ” She retraced her head with a jerk. The old weaver woman, Phuphi, sat like a warden of the marches on the threshold of her house up the lane, drinking a saucerful of tea. The concentration in the dilated dark eyes of Phuphi had always frightened Gobindi, for she knew that the old woman was a confidante of her hard, narrow mother-in-law and it always seemed as if the latter had breathed her soul’s grim secrets into the ears of the weaver woman before her death. Phuphi had always talked of ‘ rescuing her ’ from the sinful glances of the menfolk. And the vigilant little shrivelled neck of the old woman, craning into the lane above the saucer of tea, was eloquent.

Gobindi stepped back into the courtyard, her head inclined to a side in order to listen.

A cock crowed in the yard of the old woman’s home. And she could hear Phuphi cursing.

The sudden realisation came to her that her plan to escape to her mother’s village was shattered. She scampered back to the verandah nevertheless, hoping against hope, and lifted her bundle. But just then there was the sound of footsteps walking up the lane towards her house and she knew she was done for.

The boots rolled off the bundle and fell with a thud through her crumbling hands.

As she bent to pick them up, Seth Milap Chand was already at the door rattling the door latch and calling.

‘The wife of Jai Singh ! Little one ! May we come in ?’

Gobindi sat down in a huddle and, demurely pulling her head cloth over her eyes, answered :

‘Han Sethji, ao, come in.’

‘We wanted to avoid undue noise and talk and gossip by getting all this business over before many people are about,’ began Seth Milap Chand to cover his embarrassment. His thick-set form was covered with sweat and his eyes were averted over his huge nose, surveying the property at the same time. ‘I have brought the gentleman who will buy the whole house, Dr. Sain Das . . .’

Gobindi did not answer, but sat getting hotter and hotter on her bundle.

‘Come forward, Dr. Sahib,’ Milap Chand said.

Gobindi peered through the aperture of her headcloth and saw a black giant with glasses on his small eyes, a veritable elephant in an English suit, advancing with his arms on his hips. The old woman Phuphi came trailing, bent-back, behind them and some noisy children crowded in at the door.

‘If the back wall is pulled down, Dr. Sahib, the house faces the bazaar . . . I suggest you have a door put in there and let the male patients come in that way and keep the back door in the gully for the purdah patients . . . It will do fine for your purposes, especially as the house next door will soon . . .’ He coughed and then nodding, continued : ‘By and by you can extend the practice . . .’

‘Hun !’ the elephant of a Doctor nodded. ‘Not much of a place ; it will have to be rebuilt entirely later.’

‘But it is alright for the while, isn’t it ?’ said Seth Milap Chand to clinch the bargain.

‘Hun, well it will have to do,’ the Doctor said.

‘So we will have a hospital here!’ said Phuphi. ‘Oh how my back aches. Perhaps Dr. Sahib can give me a poultice or something.’

‘Never you mind, old woman,’ said Milap Chand to shake her off.

‘What about the bedstead and the pots and pans?’ asked the Doctor. ‘They are with the house, I hope!’

‘Oh, I hadn’t thought of that, but we can discuss that later. I would like to go and have a bath at the well in the fields.’

‘To wash off your sins, I suppose,’ said the old woman. ‘Not ashamed to possess the property acquired through Gobindi’s prostitution!’

‘Phuphi Mai!’ protested Gobindi between her tears.

‘Don’t bark, you two!’ shouted Milap Chand. ‘I have spared you all the humiliation of an auction. I specially brought over Dr. Sahib at great inconvenience to him early the morning. And you—’

‘Leave them alone,’ said Dr. Sain Das, who did not want a row between the moneylender and the old woman.

‘Acha, then, Dr. Sahib, let us go . . .’

At that instant his eyes fell on the bundle of goods and the boots which stood by Gobindi. So he lunged forward, shouting :

‘Thief! the daughter of a bitch! What were you stealing from here! Open that bundle. And those boots—my son Gulzari Lal wants those!’

The words stabbed Gobindi’s soul and she fluttered under the headcloth like a wounded bird, uttering hiccupping cries and sobbing even as she fell on her bundle.

‘Open it, bitch!’

‘Don’t be hard on her,’ old Phuphi rallied to the girl’s aid. ‘She had meant to give those boots to my son, as a last gift from Jai Singh. After all, the boys were friends.’

‘Open the bundle and let us see what you are taking away,’ said Dr. Sain Das authoritatively. ‘Old woman, ask her to open it.’

‘Come, my daughter, let these evil faces see what is in the bundle and I’ll see that they don’t deprive you of your personal things—those boots especially which you meant to give to my son, anyhow.’

A shock of horror went through Gobindi’s soul as the old woman came towards her. She left the bundle but clutched the boots.

‘Open that bundle!’ Milap Chand ordered.

Old Phuphi began to undo the knots on the bundle while the moneylender and the Doctor came forward to see what was in it.

‘And give me those boots for Gulzari,’ said the moneylender, pushing Gobindi away from where she clutched the memory of Jai Singh.

The whole of Gobindi’s life seemed to lie in the remembrances of that hold she had on the boots, and she felt her spirit rising and falling as the hope of saving the relic rose and fell.

‘There is nothing very much except her knick-knacks in the bundle,’ said Dr. Sain Das, gingerly exploring the clothes. ‘Those boots are the only worthwhile things. I could do with them if I have to trudge through the countryside.’

‘Gulzari—’ began Milap Chand.

‘Eaters of your masters, they are already given away as a gift to my son,’ said the old woman, trying to wrest the pair from Gobindi.

Gobindi struggled with all the grim strength of her young body for a while, her headcloth falling away and revealing a face convulsed with suppressed sobs. But old Phuphi scratched with her claws and Seth Milap Chand thrust her

aside with both hands while the Doctor kicked her as though she were a dog.

‘ You have the temerity to deny me the huckster’s profit on the deal,’ said the moneylender, wresting the boots out of Gobindi’s hands after all.

The girl suddenly reeled where she sat and fell headlong on the earth weeping bitterly and screaming :

‘ I’ll go mad ! I’ll go mad ! ’

The children fled in terror.

Professor Cheeta

(To Fredoon Kabraji)

PROFESSOR CHEETA heaved himself up from his seat on the top of the 77 bus immediately after it had left the Russell Hotel and, in the absence of the conductor upstairs, pressed the red knob of the bell with all his might.

The driver looked round with a scowl on his face, the passengers all stared hard and the conductor, coming to the top of the stairs, mumbled some of the spiciest words in the unacknowledged but most telling and forceful vocabulary of proletarian speech.

The bus hesitated under the clock of Sir Isaac Pitman’s Typewriting School, but did not stop until it had gone well past Peter’s Bar by the Burlington Hotel, almost opposite Bloomsbury Place.

That is exactly where Professor Cheeta had meant it to stop.

‘Come on now, Oldie, your bus fare finished at Russell Square y’ know!’ the conductor shouted.

‘Perhaps he does not understand,’ a passenger said.

‘Oh yes, he does! He comes this way every afternoon!’ the conductor said.

‘Thank you, thank you!’ Professor Cheeta said sheepishly as he struggled down from the bus, breathing heavily.

‘Thank you . . .’

‘Come on then—I thank you!’ the conductor said ironically, ‘Come on . . .’

Seemingly undaunted, he stepped down from the deck of the bus hurriedly but carefully, deploring the fact that there was so little respect for old age in the world nowadays, and he began to walk down the pavement with mincing steps, followed by the humorous invective of the conductor.

Professor Cheeta was on his way to the British Museum Reading Room to research on the morphology of certain nouns and verbs in the Sanskrit, English and German languages, with a view to establish the cultural affinities of the Indo-Germanic peoples in particular, and the world in general, so as to promote world brotherhood, peace, tolerance and goodwill among men. He had started this particular enquiry about twenty-five years ago on the rebound against the fanatical nationalism of his earlier days and the terrorism with which he had toyed. But, as his research was nowhere near completion and as world tension grew, he was thinking of doing something more immediate, to write a short piece, a poem, to contribute his share to the solution of the difficulties of our troubled times. But almost every day he came into conflict with someone whose look or word implied ‘black man’ and his earlier terroristic impulses re-asserted themselves. He could not concentrate enough to put anything down and felt as though life were crumbling away around him. Now and then he walked the

whole distance from his home in King's Cross Road in order to keep his thoughts together. But he was too old at sixty-four and couldn't keep it up. The life of poetry and reflection seemed to him more and more irreconcilable with the world of buses and trams.

Still, he rolled along at amazing speed on the short, squat legs which carried his top-heavy, stocky little frame, loaded with clothes. For summer or winter, he wore two shirts, a thick waist-coat made of eiderdown, a rough suit, a large, frayed overcoat, a coloured muffler round his neck, another tied as a turban on his round head, which fell almost over his ears and covered his round coffee-coloured face.

He could not resist looking at the shop windows of Harding's bookshop in Great Russell Street, mumbling to himself names of the books displayed. Then, suddenly with a jerk, he tore himself away as if he were in a special hurry to get to the Reading Room and did not want to linger. For, ordinarily, he did not regard the Reading Room as a library, but more as a social club where he met all his old friends and cronies among the international fraternity of scholars, cranks, exiles and refugees who had also been researching here for years, monuments of industry and patience who emerged from their lonely attics and converged here towards the late afternoon.

'You are late to-day, Professor?' the tall, top-hatted beadle said by way of a greeting.

'Hellow, Mr. Jenks!' the Professor returned the greeting.

'Ow are you? And the wife?'

Jenks' perennial inquiries about the wife had always embarrassed him, for, from the first, Peggy had patronised him by saying that she was marrying him, a coloured man, against the wishes of her family; and he had never got on with her. 'Rather seedy! Rather seedy you know, Mr. Jenks, my wife is rather seedy,' he said hypocritically.

and then sought to change the subject. 'The weather has not been too good . . . The Sun! Oh, the Sun of my country!'

'Too hot for me!' Jenks said, 'When I was in your country up in Chitral I had malaria. Yes, too hot for me, your country!'

'And it is getting hotter—what with Gandhi!' interjected the dour policeman who stood by the gate.

But the Professor was not really listening. The mention of the Sun had excited a train of thought in his mind and he mumbled academically to himself: 'The Sun has many names, Brahma, Vishnu, Krishna, Surya, Apollo, Ra, Isis, Phoebus, Thor . . .'

'And mumbo-jumbo,' said the porter with a laugh.

The Professor did not take any notice of Jenks, but began suddenly, spontaneously like a child to weave a rhapsodic chant about the Sun, as children do when they are fascinated by a word.

'I am the son of the Sun
the true son of the Sun,
descended from the tribe of the worshippers of Surya,
baked in the fire of the Lord . . .'

'Breeds a lot of maggots, the Sun!' said Jenks.

But the Professor did not heed him and walked away with a wave of the hand, singing snatches of little verses and soliloquising in his rhapsodic manner.

'I am the circle above the zone of the Equator
who stirred the seas
and shook the mountains,
who hurled the earth
into the mounting storm
of light . . .'

'He's off his head!' Jenks said to the policeman.

'Poet and don't know it!' the policeman answered.

As Professor Cheeta walked along, talking to himself and chanting the words of certain half-forgotten poems, absent-minded and unconcerned with everyone else, he was yet aware that he was different from most men in the Juggernaut of commerce which was rushing on outside. An exile from his homeland ever since he had come out of jail for suspected terrorism, he had never taken any roots in this country for all the thirty years that he had spent here. People stared at him, turned back to look at his queer gnome-like, dark, heavy figure, swathed in a thick overcoat, with the blue turban on his head and pince-nez on his nose. The children whispered to each other about whether he was an African or a Red Indian and cheeked him by asking him the time.

But though he seemed a fool to others, he was a dreamer imbued with the precariousness of life. For throughout his life there had come to him certain impulses and visions, vague and fleeting at first, but which had lingered in him with a subtle sense of beauty, nobility and grandeur, like a melody that moved him strongly at odd moments and then evaporated.

And he knew certain kindred souls whose life had been disturbed in the same way but who had later accepted some kind of compensatory faith. There was Miss Richardson, for instance, a lady of seventy, an ardent Christian prohibitionist, who worshipped the memory of Pussyfoot Johnson, read Dr. Mathew's rendering of the Bible in the Reading Room, and fed pigeons in the compound.

'Come and see my little ones,' she said in a squeaky voice as the Professor strolled up to-day.

Professor Cheeta made a noise with his lips in the cooing language of pigeons and then broke out into human speech :

'Come, my sons, come, you flutter like my heart.'

'They are not afraid,' said Miss Richardson with a laugh

which knit her shrivelled, lined face with a queer, innocent beauty, the aura of the devoted, of those who believe.

‘Hellow, Miss Richardson,’ said Professor Cheeta almost flirtatiously.

‘The pets—they are so hungry!’ said the old woman blushing a little.

‘They are happy as the air,’ said Professor Cheeta conventionally. But in his heart there was a tense emptiness, as though he felt the need for wings, but realised that he hadn’t even a face, or a tongue to speak with, as though he could not even move or look at anyone. And there came a far-away look in his eyes, a kind of fixed stare at the nothingness about him.

‘Why so sad, Professor?’ Miss Richardson asked as she threw more crumbs onto the palm of her hand.

Professor Cheeta sighed an almost inaudible sigh and, swallowing a choking breath, said in a doleful voice:

‘I was born in India, you know, Miss Richardson, in the country of dreams, the fountain of fables, the source of much knowledge and wisdom—and tears . . .’

‘How many Christians are there in India, altogether?’ asked Miss Richardson, ‘I have always wanted to ask you that, Professor?’

‘As a young man,’ went on Professor Cheeta, without heeding her question, and almost as if he were talking to himself, ‘I felt I had a dream. Brighter than all dreams, a glorious vision of myself—I wanted to write a poem in which I could infuse the spirit of fire, which would embody light, which would, if you see what I mean, be radiant, glowing and bright, which would put some meaning into things.’

‘I am quite sure if you believe in Jesus,’ began Miss Richardson.

But Professor Cheeta did not let her finish her sentence,

which he knew was the beginning of a quite mechanical speech to convert him that she always delivered in season and out of season. He was too restless and felt as if even his instinct for words was betraying him, as though he were losing his grasp on life altogether. 'Time went on,' he said, 'and the vision still persisted, flashing and sparkling in my brain, flowing like the music of rushing waters, shimmering like the sunshine and bathing me in the aroma of roses, if you see what I mean, a fire consumed me—.'

'And then?' Miss Richardson said, now interested.

'Oh lady,' replied Professor Cheeta, moving his head about dolefully till the pigeons took fright and fluttered; 'I was let down, betrayed, put into jail. And since then I have been too preoccupied with mundane struggles. Too pulled about, torn by the strain of it all to believe ever in poetry.'

'Didn't Krishna say, "Live in Action"?' asked Miss Richardson.

'He was speaking in another time,' said Professor Cheeta. 'Nowadays, what with atom bombs and the rest, I feel—' And he waved his short arm in a gesture of despair.

'To work then on your dream!' exhorted Miss Richardson, so that the pigeons fluttered with the echo of her voice. 'You have no time to lose.'

Professor Cheeta was affected by the peremptory note in her voice and looked at her for a moment. Then he withdrew his gaze inwards as if he felt the will to have vision anew and was trying to hold fast to a glimpse of it. Greeting Miss Richardson with a bow he fairly ran towards the Reading Room, taking two steps at a time, hurrying through the swing doors and the hall amid the babble of sightseers' voices. He did not even halt to return the 'Good afternoon' of the porter at the doors of the Reading Room, but scrambled towards the North Library, panting

for breath. His thoughts seemed to go askew as though the dome had pressed them out and his eyes moved furtively outwards and inwards, as if to keep the vision in control.

'Is this seat taken, Mr. Southern?' he asked an old man with the beard of Havelock Ellis and the eyes of Bertrand Russell.

'Sh, sh!' shushed Mr. Southern who, though a friend of Professor Cheeta's, was compiling the history of Egypt in thirty volumes and had no time to answer irrelevant questions.

Professor Cheeta's face fell a little and he drifted away, groping for a seat and assuring himself in his mind that if only he could get hold of a seat and a pen he could cause the ink to run into gold and hold the glimpse of the beauty and the tragedy he had lived, captive forever . . . Therefore, he did not acknowledge Mr. Davis who was writing a treatise to blow the cancer research racket sky-high, or Father Talbot who was writing up the Spanish Inquisition. But he noticed Professor Palmer, the orientalist, and his heart congealed, for Palmer had written a most vicious introduction to a translation of the *Gita* and was now doing a commentary to damn the Vedas. Professor Cheeta's eyes quivered with fear and he changed his direction. The Reading Room was full at this time. One of the friendly old assistants, Evans, seeing the Professor in distress, came up to him and said:

'You are late to-day, aren't you? There is only ten minutes to closing time!'

'Yes,' Professor Cheeta said, apologetically, 'Can you get me a seat, Mr. Evans? I have something important to write.'

'Wait then,' Evans said, 'I shall look around at the other end.'

'Thank you,' Professor Cheeta said, and moved towards

the corners of hope. Looking up at the clock he felt as if the years were rolling by with every tick of the minute-hand. And the urge of the poem in his heart beat louder and louder as he saw the pens of the readers running faster and faster before closing time. Afraid of losing the rhythm of his song, as well as to test its ring on the tympanum of his ears, he paced up and down impatiently, and, losing sight of Evans, stood talking to himself as if he were in a delirium. 'I am no mere bookworm . . . like that Mr. Southern there. Buried beneath dusty volumes. I am no mere chronicler of the dead; I have something in me. My love for my country. I am stirred like the waves of the sea, Mr. Palmer, ghost of dead ideas that you are! I am possessed by the Sun.'

'Please don't talk so loudly,' a reader said.

But Professor Cheeta was absorbed in himself and went on burr-burring, 'I am the Son of the Sun . . . I . . .'

'Please don't disturb me,' the reader said.

'Young man!' the Professor said, surprised at the student's lack of consideration, 'I want to sit down.'

'Oh alright, go away from here!' the young reader stammered impatiently.

Now the other readers were disturbed too and there came suppressed whispers of concern, brief injunctions, suppressed threats, silent angry looks, more potent than any words.

'What is all this noise?' a minor official said coming up to SS2.

'Oh my head aches,' Professor Cheeta was saying to himself.

'Throw him out! . . . Sh . . . Chuck him out!' the readers said, bursting from beneath a hitherto suppressed hysteria which seemed to have been waiting to explode in the silence.

'I shall fetch the Superintendent,' said the official.

Possessed by tremors of hate and frustration, Professor Cheeta turned towards the exit. His whole frame quivered with the fear that all the Englishmen in the Museum were following him and that they were going to lynch him. Above these delusions the smoke of chagrin covered his thoughts, his head hung down and there was a light in his eyes which was too furtive to stare ahead. As he raced along, the turbulent music of anguish in his body blinded him completely and he fell headlong across the steps by a bookshelf with a giant thud.

‘Oh, the poor old man!’ someone said.

‘Give him a hand!’ another said.

‘Now, now, what have you done, Professor!’ Evans said, rushing up after him.

The Assistant Keeper of Printed Books came down from his perch at this uproar, a tall, towering, bald-headed man. He scowled at the people who had gathered round the old man, whispered something to himself and went away. He knew that Cheeta, like several other people, regarded the library as a social club, and disliked him for making himself a nuisance.

‘And I found you a seat too!’ Evans was saying consolingly to the Professor as he lifted him . . . ‘And you go and fall down like that! Come!’

At that instant the closing bell of the Reading Room rang.

‘There you are, you couldn’t have written much to-day, anyhow,’ said Evans, seeing him to the door. ‘Now steady as you go . . .’

‘Thank you, Mr. Evans, thank you for your trouble,’ Professor Cheeta said as he hobbled along.

Then he felt for his turban which had come undone. He did not stop to retie it, however, and went along, clutching

his old portfolio securely in his left hand and mumbling :
' Oh my head ! Oh my head ! '

' Hello Professor ! Hello ! ' someone called to him by the cloak-room.

But he did not want to meet anyone now and hurried out.

' He seems very restless to-day ! ' the porter said to the policeman, as he saw him rushing away without the familiar, long drawn-out conferences with Professor Carlo, the Professor of Languages, and Mr. Matthews, who came to the Reading Room to pick up newspapers from the waste paper baskets, and the various Indian students.

The next day he received an official, brief, curt letter from the Keeper of Books informing him that his Reading Room ticket was cancelled. After he had lain in bed the whole morning, recovering from this shock, he tried to get up and proceed to the Museum as usual. But as he was dressing, he fell with a thud on the floor and was laid out for months and confined to bed with an undiagnosible malaise.

When he recovered slightly, he begged his wife to wheel him to the compound of the Reading Room. But the doctor disallowed any such exercise.

After that he was bed-ridden and kept losing weight as if something inside him was gnawing at him and corroding his strength.

Miss Richardson came to see him twice or thrice and tried to give him faith. But he seemed inconsolable. Having lingered, for some months, with failing powers of physique, he passed away one afternoon at almost the time he used to go to the Reading Room, mumbling to himself the while :

' I am the son of the Sun,
I am the Sun,
The Sun . . . '

The Tractor and the Corn Goddess

(To Sharokh Sabavala)

My uncle Chajju it was who really caused most of the trouble about the tractor. Of course, not being a devout person he was not the person who raised the slogans 'Religion in Danger,' 'The Corn Goddess has been insulted,' 'No truck with this Tractor,' 'The invention of the Devil,' and so forth. In fact, as soon as the affair began to assume the form of a Hindu-Muslim issue, he literally put his foot down on the machine and very proudly had himself photographed, as a Sahib has himself photographed with his foot upon the back of a tiger which a shikari has actually shot. Nevertheless, it was a phrase of his which was responsible for the whole rumpus, or rather a great deal of it.

The facts of the case, which has assumed the significance of a legendary happening in our parts, were these. When the big landlord of our village, the Nawab Sahib of Bhagira, died, his only son, Nawabzada Mumtaz Ali Khan, who was reputed to be a worthless, irresponsible fool, addicted to such European habits as bad company and drink, came home from abroad and started to behave in a manner which most people thought was quite mad, or, to say the least, somewhat strange. For, in the old days when a Zamindar died, his son and heir generally levied a tax for the funeral expenses on the peasants and followed it up by levying another tax still for the motors and the horses he had brought and generally made the peasants aware of the advent of a new order. But, on his arrival, Nawabzada Mumtaz Ali Khan issued a proclamation that the sum of

seven lakhs, which had accrued through the illegal dues of the previous year would be distributed equally to all the peasants of his seven villages and that anyone who came to see him and put token money at his feet before making his plea, would not be listened to at all, and that uncle Chajju, who was the ring leader of the goondas of our parts and had been exiled, was to be allowed to come back.

Most of the peasants, whose fathers, grandfathers and great grandfathers had been known to pay Nazrana, though secretly happy at being relieved of illegal exactions, still thought that it was bad form on the part of the new Nawab and a breach of the old custom, for, they said : ' after all the Zamindar is in the position of a ma-bap to us.' And uncle Chajju came back thumping his chest like Goonga, the famous wrestler, the Rustum of Hind, and declared that the new landlord was simply yellow and frightened of him.

When Muntaz announced his next set of reforms, that he intended, by deed poll, to renounce all rights to his land and formed a Co-op in which all the tenants had equal shares, there came various deputations from the elders of the villages, relations and friends to restrain him from his insanity before the papers finally went through. The Deputy Commissioner of the area called the errant boy to him and reprimanded him severely for betraying the trust reposed in him by his forefathers, the community and the Sarkar. And, needless to say, the papers were annulled and the reforms were not executed.

Of course, Mumtaz was nothing if he was not a stubborn mule, once he had got hold of a notion in his head. And he began a long series of debates with the Sarkar ~~about~~ his right to divest himself of the land and yet avoid a court of wards being imposed on him. But while this matter was still dragging on and all kinds of opinions, good and bad,

were being expressed by people about the Nawab's strange behaviour, he brought in that tractor which caused the biggest crisis of all.

Certainly Muntaz had chosen the wrong moment to introduce this gadget on his estate. For, the months of talk about the new-fangled ideas which he had brought from Europe, and adverse comments on the long-haired, unkempt, dishevelled men and women, called, 'Comrades,' who went in and out of the 'big house,' day and night, his reputation was in that state of chassis when one more error would lead to a final show down. Perhaps he forgot about the fate of Amir Amanullah of Afghanistan. Or, may be, he modelled himself on Mustapha Kemal. At any rate, he only escaped by the skin of his teeth and he ought to be grateful that he is alive to-day.

The actual incident happened under the banyan tree just outside the big home one morning. The giant tractor had been fetched about eleven o'clock from the Railway Station by Comrade Abdul Hamid, the Engineer. Abdul Hamid brought the monster engine not across the main road, which is mostly empty except for straggling pedestrians, but through the fields of the estate when the peasants were busy ploughing for the Rabbi harvest, and, as the machine furrowed the earth deeply before it came to rest at Muntaz's door, the peasants gathered from all sides, chased the tractor, some shouting, some just staring, some whispering to each other, all aghast with wonder or fear at this new monstrosity which had appeared in their lives and which threatened to do something to them, they knew not what.

It was at that juncture that uncle Chajju took the lead in the crisis. By one expletive he crystallised the feelings of all of them.

'Rape-mother' he said caustically, even as he sat smoking the hubble-bubble under the banyan tree.

‘That’s right,’ old Phagu chimed in. ‘I hear it tore up the earth as it came along.’

‘The earth then has been desecrated!’ said Shambhu Nath, the Brahmin priest.

‘Han, the Corn Goddess, the mother, the giver of all food, has been raped!’ said his devotee, Dhunni Bhagat, running up behind him.

‘Toba! Toba!’ said the Maulvi of the mosque, rolling his eyeballs and touching his ears under his green turban.

‘Rape-mother!’ repeated uncle Chajju. ‘Why doesn’t this boy Mumtaz come out and tell us what is in his mind, the secretive one. What is his game?’ and he wore a quizzical expression on his frank face, which was more the index of a hurt pride than anything else, almost as though being an open-minded, hearty, old rogue he resented the fact that Mumtaz had not taken him into his confidence.

‘I hear,’ said Jodha, the oldest peasant of the village, ‘that as the White race has never possessed the Shiva-Shakti which was in the sinews of our people, they have been inventing all kind of artificial medicines to make themselves potent. If it is true, what Dhunni Bhagat says, that the Corn Goddess has been raped, then this instrument ought to be sent back across the seas to the perverts who have invented it . . . Why, our religion, our shame is involved! Darkness has descended over the earth. What are things coming to? That our boys should be supposed to be so weak that they can’t plough the land with the good old wooden plough! That I should have lived to see this insult to our race!’

‘Ohe chup kar, Baba!’ said Chajju. ‘It is not your voice we want to hear, but that of this young landlord of ours.’

‘Toba! Toba!’ whispered the Maulvi rolling his eyes and touching his ears.

‘Why are you touching your ears and whispering because we have spoken the truth!’ said devotee Dhunni Bhagat. ‘You are very shocked at our language but seem not to care that our mother earth, the Corn Goddess, has been desecrated . . .’

‘To be sure, it is a question of religion,’ said Shambu Nath. ‘No Hindu landlord would have brought an artificial instrument like this to tear up the earth of a Muhammadian village.’

‘To be sure!’ said Tirath, a crochetty, old shopkeeper, ‘Our religion has been despoiled.’

‘Ohe chup, stop this kind of foolish talk and call that young son of a gun to come and explain to us what he has inflicted on us,’ counselled uncle Chajju.

‘To be sure! To be sure!’ said one of the young peasants. ‘It is probably an electric machine, with power stored in its belly,’ said another.

‘Uncle Chajju is right—we must know what it is for?’ opined yet another and tried to touch the tractor ever so gingerly.

‘Ohe careful, Ohe careful, it is the magic of Shiva-Shakti in a new form,’ speculated Jodha. ‘The invention of the Ferungis, who have weakened our race. You might die of the touch as the crows on the electric wire die every day.’

‘Our Mahatma had already warned us against such machines,’ said Dhunni Bhagat. ‘We will not stand for the rape of the Corn Goddess, specially under Congress Raj.’

At that instant Abdul Hamid, the Engineer, emerged from the big house.

‘Now then, come and tell us your meaning in bringing this here,’ challenged uncle Chajju.

‘Get away, get away, don’t crowd round the Tractor,’ said Hamid arrogantly, ‘Nawab Sahib is coming.’

‘Ohe look, folks, our religion has been despoiled!’ shouted Dhunni. ‘And he talks like this. Our Corn Goddess . . .’

‘Yes, there is leather on it, I am sure, somewhere,’ added Shambu.

‘Go, go, lentil eaters,’ shouted Hamid.

‘Don’t you insult the priest of the Goddess after you have trampled upon her body!’ said Dhunni.

‘Don’t you bark,’ said Hamid, measuring himself up against the devotee, with his torso stretched tight.

‘Toba ! Toba !’ sighed the Maulvi and wagged his beard.

‘Come, Come, boys,’ counselled uncle Chajju. ‘There is no talk of religion or the Corn Goddess or anything like that. All we want to know is what is this machine, how it is going to be used and what it is made of . . .’

‘To be sure, to be sure, uncle Chajju is right, that is what we want,’ said the boys of the village.

‘I can settle that easily,’ said the Nawab craning his head behind the knot of men who had gathered round Hamid, the Engineer. ‘It is a Tractor—that is what it is called.’

‘So it is the rape-mother tractor!’ said Chajju partially satisfied.

‘It has despoiled the body of our mother, the Corn Goddess!’ shouted Dhunni.

‘It has ruined our religion,’ said Shambu.

‘We will have no truck with this Tractor,’ said Jodha.

‘Toba ! Toba !’ said the Maulvi.

‘Ohe, stop this loose talk,’ said uncle Chajju. ‘Let him explain now, let him talk since he has broken his vow of silence, the shy boy.’

‘Well, it is a machine which can do the work of a hundred bullocks in one hour. It will till the land of all our seven villages in a fraction of the time that it now takes us to plough it.’

‘Are you sure it is not a gari with hidden guns in it?’ asked Chajju. ‘You haven’t brought it to shoot us down with, have you?’

‘There is probably imprisoned here all the Shiva-Shakti which the white race has robbed us of during their rule here,’ said old Jodha.

‘There is magic power in it!’ said Phagu.

‘Jinns,’ said another peasant.

‘Blutts?’ said yet another.

‘Don’t be so suspicious, brothers,’ said the Nawab, ‘It is for your good that I have brought it. It is only iron and steel, so tempered as to plough the land quickly.’

‘I would like it to be taken to pieces before I can believe that there is no magic in it,’ said Phagu. ‘And Jinns and Bhutts?’

‘Ohe it is the Shiva-Shakti, fools,’ assured Jodha.

‘It is alright so long as there is not a gun concealed in it,’ said Chajju. ‘That is all I am concerned with, for I am a man of peace!’

At that there was loud laughter, for my uncle Chajju is too well known as a cantankerous, quarrelsome creature to be altogether accepted at his own valuation as a man of peace.

‘Well,’ said the landlord after the amusement had subsided, but before the atmosphere of goodwill built up at the expense of Chajju had altogether evaporated, ‘The Tractor is yours and you can take it to the fields.’

‘I suspect it is like the decoy wooden horse that was used by the soldiers in the story of the land across the seas!’ said Phagu shaking his head sceptically.

‘I think, Baba!’ said uncle Chajju. ‘You are right in suspecting this engine. And I agree with you when you ask for it to be taken to pieces before our eyes. We will only be content if it is reassembled before our own eyes.’

Because, then, we can learn to master all the Jinns and Bhutts in it !’

‘ Uncle Chajju,’ said the landlord, ‘ I can see your meaning. It is right that you should be able to contact the Jinns and Bhutts in it. I nominate you to be the foreman under whose supervision the Engineer Sahib will take it to pieces. And then you shall learn to drive it, so that all the demons in it do the rough work of the village and give us more time to sleep under the shade of this banyan in the afternoons.’

‘ It is a great shock to my sensibility to learn to harness a steel plough,’ said uncle Chajju, ‘ especially as I have never got over my love for my two bullocks who died in the drought, but I don’t mind putting myself out a little if all of us can really have a longer siesta . . . In the hot weather there is no place like the shade of this banyan.’

Uncle Chajju is one of those funny men who has only to open his mouth to say a word to make people laugh. Perhaps it is his manner more than his method. Certainly, it is the tonal quality of his theth Punjabi accent that gets the villagers like a contagion. The amusement created by his speech reconciled all the recalcitrants to the Tractor, though not until after it had really been pulled to pieces and each peasant had touched its several bolts and knobs and felt the motive power of its dynamo next to their ears. After the terror of Jinns and Bhuts had been appeased and curiosity satisfied, it remained for honour to have its due share. The Nawab photographed all the villagers with the Tractor in their midst. And, of course, uncle Chajju, in the role of the new driver, stood like a colossus right in the foreground of the picture, as a Sahib stands with his foot upon the back of a tiger which a shikari has actually shot.

Little Flower

(To Peter Johnson)

HE stood at the corner of Silver Street and Commercial Road, a little way off from the Indian Seamen's Club. His back rested on the wall and his eyes were screwed up as though he were averting the sun's glare. But there was no sun, of course, in these dark alleys of London's East End even though the spring had been early and the life giver had appeared with surprising regularity for several days running. And, really, it was because he was pretending not to look at the little house opposite that he had half closed his eyes.

Everyone had noticed this peculiar stance of the old man and wondered—even the Indian seamen and pedlars who are used in their own country to seeing sun-gazers, ascetics, lunatics, singers of the Gayatri hymn, beggars and a multitudinous humanity standing or sitting in the most varied postures. 'What are you looking at, Baba Arjun Singh?' several of these had asked him as they emerged from their hovels to go to the club or the restaurant next door. But the old man had only smiled by way of answer, a smile which got lost in the full white moustache which drooped on to the fuller white beard. Or he mumbled something which sounded both like the Sikh greeting 'Sat Sri Akal' and an interrupted soliloquy.

The English residents of the lane, though used to all the queer-looking foreigners and coloured folk, Indians, Chinese, Negroes, had begun by merely ignoring him. But finding that he was becoming a permanent fixture on the self-same

spot for several days, and especially at the time when they returned home, they had begun to look at him askance. Then, noticing that he mumbled something to himself, they had begun to think that he was barmy, or daft. All the women, said that he gave them the creeps standing there, especially in the dark.

Only the children took him for granted, because he had begun to give them toffees and two toffees to little Jeannie every day . . . They called him 'Father Xmas.' And when he had told them that his name was Arjun Singh, they had begun to miscall him 'Simple Simon.'

The person who was most perturbed about Arjun Singh's daily presence at the corner of Silver Street and Commercial Road was Mrs. Rowe whose house faced the kerb edge where the old Sikh had chosen to take his stand. She hadn't minded at first, as these Indians often stood in bunches, jabbering away to each other in their lingo. But the constant shadow of this man, who stood there, several hours a day, if not all day, and who kept staring at the door of her house had given her a feeling of uncertainty. She dared not leave the door open on these warm days to let a little fresh air in, for fear he might come in and burgle the house. These thefts were increasing. Only the other day someone had smashed the window of Miss Wilmot's sweet shop and looted all the stock. And as this 'black man' had been known to go into Miss Wilmot's store very much more often than any other 'black man' the suspicion had naturally fallen on him. Also, though the man was old, from his grey beard, you couldn't really tell. These orientals were different. Why, she couldn't even dress in her front room in the mornings as she used to do, because, though he was not there at that time, she felt he might suddenly come and take up his position in front of the house, and the gauze curtains were no protection.

Mrs. Rowe thought of mentioning it to Dad one day, so that he could stop this nuisance. But then that very afternoon she saw the children crowding round him and him giving all of them a sweet each and two sweets to her own little Jeannie, and she felt that it wasn't worth worrying about, for he might be quite a harmless man.

But her attitude suddenly hardened when one day she saw him tempt little eight-year-old Jeannie, pick her up in his arms and stand there talking to her in his pidgin English. She had heard of tramps murdering little children after they had lured them with a sweet. Also, before the war, girls had been frequently kidnapped from the East End and taken to God-knows-where. And you couldn't tell what these black men would do—they were so inscrutable. She emerged from her house and shouted at Arjun Singh: 'Put my child down! And don't you dare touch her again!'

At first Arjun Singh did not understand. He thought that the woman was annoyed with 'Jani' or 'little flower' as he sometimes called the child. Then, as the lady came threateningly towards him, he realised that she was angry with him. And the copious flow of her language as she wrested the child from him and pushed him aside showed that she did not want him to stand there any more.

After this Arjun Singh avoided standing on his usual pitch, but waited for 'little flower' outside her school at the time when children came out in the afternoon. Jeannie was rather withdrawn the first time the old Sikh beckoned her outside the school, because of the scare her mother had worked up and the injunctions she had given her not to speak to, or go near, the black man any more. But it so happened that the children had split into two gangs and were fighting with bricks, stones and other such missiles, and little Jeannie, who was in the party nearest the school gates, was getting the worst of it. At that juncture, Arjun

Singh beckoned the winning gang, as he walked up through no man's land, dangling an Indian cloth purse like a carrot to a herd of donkeys. The tinkling of the coins magically drew the leaders of the gangs to him, so that it was not even necessary to wave a white flag and call a truce. And little Jeanie was lured into the net of old Arjun Singh's affection in spite of her mother's prohibition, for he gave her two pennies while he gave the others a penny or a ha'penny each. And he picked her up, stared at her pair of blue eyes, contemplated her snub nose, tickled her under her chin and patted her mousy-brown hair as he put her down a little way before her home.

As the news of this renewed friendship between the Indian bogeyman and her daughter trickled through to Mrs. Rowe through Jeanie's faltering explanation of how she came by the two pennies she had in her pocket every day after school, there was hell to pay. Mrs. Rowe went and saw the Head Master of the school, who, surcharged with a glow of pride at the invocation of the Pooi-Ba in him, rang up the police and told them all about this suspicious character who haunted the area.

The policeman on duty in Silver Street began to move the old Sikh away from his pitch outside the school every time they saw him. They did not see anything sinister about the old man, however, and felt that he must be just an idiot or slightly crazy, but 'orders is orders' and they had to do their duty.

Arjun Singh now went back to a spot a little way away from his first pitch, but nearer the Seamen's Club. Though this did not afford as good a view of little Jeannie's house, the policemen could not object to the Sikh standing there, because of its contiguity to the Indian dump, as the child, lured by a new variety of syrupy Indian sweets, often

strayed up here to have a chat with her old friend, this scheme worked for some time.

But Mrs. Rowe had got to know of this cunning manœuvre and, finding herself at the end of her tether, had told Dad about it. Mr. Rowe, a builder's mate and navvy, knew only one argument as far as 'these niggers' were concerned. And he went up to old Arjun Singh one day after work with a fair sprinkling of such expletives as a rough and ready man in the East End is wont to employ and brandished it at him.

He could not, however, actually use the argument, but that was not his fault. It was these damned interfering women, who did not seem to know their own mind. For his wife, seeing him go menacingly up to old Beaver, rushed out, hollering the place down and prevented him from socking the 'damned nigger.' And what's more, she shamed him before the Indian by taking the man by the hand and leading him straight to their front parlour and giving him a cup of tea. What were things coming to? She had scowled at her husband and served him his 'cuppa' last. What was all this trouble about, if Jean was allowed to sit by the Indian and have tea? . . .

Bert Rowe had rubbed his eyes and wondered at Peggy's contradictory behaviour. And, after the old Indian had gone, he shouted: 'What the Hell is the use of complaining to me about that black b . . . if you wanted to ask him to tea?'

'You might have hit him if I hadn't stopped you and then you might have been had up for manslaughter' Mrs. Rowe answered. 'After all, what's the man done to deserve that? He has only given sweets and pennies to our Jean. 'Course I don't want Jean to get into the habit of accepting things from strangers, but old Beaver seems a

nice man. Lovely teeth he's got. And he smiles ever so nicely . . . '

'Well, well, well . . . what a b . . . blinking wonder you are,' Mr. Rowe stammered out, dazed by her sudden change of front, 'Mary, Mary, quite contrary, as they say, in the nursery rhyme !'

But Mrs. Rowe found that after this incident she did not feel the creeps any more on seeing the Indian stand around. Instead, the haunting shadow, who seemed to have oppressed her, with all kinds of fears, terrors of forests, Huddo land, tigers, snakes and white slave traffickers, became a human being with pearly teeth and a gentle smile, still slightly uncanny, because he talked to himself, but familiar. Her husband warned her to look out. But something had risen in her like a judge against the subterfuges of her common sense, a vision of herself at the age of three when she had been given a dolly by somebody dressed up as Father Xmas and she had felt too shy to kiss him in spite of her mother's persuasion. . . .

Now the friendship between old Arjun Singh and little Jeannie grew to unprecedented heights of splendour. There came a light in the Sikh's dull eyes and he stopped talking aloud to himself, much to the relief of everyone, and even began to concentrate on peddling his goods more than he had done for months. And Jeannie was so excited in anticipation of the 'piggy-back' ride astride his neck, of the sweets and the stories which Arjun Singh showered upon her, that she pestered her mother by talk about the 'Indian uncle' all morning before going to school and after her return. She did not like the insistence with which he wanted to hunt the creatures in her head, but apart from that he was the most adorable person to her. So that she even bored her schoolmates with tales of the fun she had and told those of the kids who would listen the story of

Jumbo, the old elephant, whose wife and baby had been taken by the hunters and who had been forced by the loneliness in the jungle to stray into the hands of a circus master and been brought to Blighty, which the 'Indian uncle' usually told her. And, all day, she felt like the 'Little Flower' which he said she was, his ruby, his fairy princess. And through her stories of Injia and her talk she became the centre of the children's prattle, the most important girl in the neighbourhood. There was a temporary rift in the lute of this friendship, however, when the friends of little Jeannie echoed the sentiments of the lucky girl to their mothers and fathers. For the neighbours had begun to talk of the scandalous goings-on in the Rowe household, when they had seen the 'black man' being led by Mrs. Rowe into her parlour after the scene outside the 'black man's club.' And now that they heard the garbled versions of the stories of Jumbo, the elephant, of the queer 'ain-wain' songs that were sung to little Jeannie by the 'black man' and of the black magic that was performed, they were naturally malicious.

But Mrs. Rowe was more than a match for her neighbours in the gentle art of invective, specially if she had had a pint at the local. And, she had now begun to take Arjun Singh for granted, almost as she assumed the existence of the cactus her brother-in-law Dick, the sailor, had brought her on his return from the tropics. Friendship, like a plant, needs to be nurtured with a little sprinkling of water, but the warmth of Arjun Singh's presence, like the life of the cactus, did not need much care to foster.

And soon the gossip about the 'queer goings-on' in Mrs. Rowe's household burgeoned into a number of myths and legends of the most delightful character in the whole of the East End, stories as enchanting as those connected with the stuffed birds, the solar topees, the knives, swords

and other items of exotic interests which hung like festoons over the bar of the public house 'Prospect.' And there was a little more peace on earth and goodwill among men than is usual, almost as though for a few days life in the East End had become wrapped in a dream which was pleasant, slightly ridiculous and suffused with the glow of midsummer.

There is no dream from which men do not awaken, however. And this dream did not last.

Almost as a sudden, unprecedented and magical incident changes the plot of every one among the thousand and one tales of the Arabian Nights, something uncanny happened to interrupt the even course of the story of the friendship between Arjun Singh and little Jeannie.

One day, at the end of summer, the hero of the story, Arjun Singh, pedlar, seaman, Father Xmas, Simple Simon, Beaver, black man, magician, disappeared. And soon the gap created by his absence became as familiar as was the shadow of his haunting presence in the East End. So that many people were prone to dismiss the myths and legends that had grown up around him as pure fabrications, even though they had actually seen him in the flesh. Life here was a going concern and people accepted it while the going was good and forgot easily, for they had much to forget, and time passed quickly. . . .

There was only one slight echo on the tympanums of people's ears a little later, which made Arjun Singh immortal in the memories of the East End. And, characteristically, it was the kind of shock which the old Sikh seemed foredestined to administer, so silent, so grave, so gentle was he and yet so warm in his quiet way. A parcel arrived one winter morning addressed to "Little Flower," 10 Silver Street, E.C., containing a silk sari, a pair of gold earrings, some dried fruit and Arjun Singh's identity card with some-

thing scribbled on it in Gurmukhi. When Mr. Rowe had the hieroglyphs deciphered by a Punjabi at Narayana Singh's restaurant in Whitechapel Lane, it read as follows : ' For my little Flower.'

Since then, sometimes, when Mr. or Mrs. Rowe meet an Indian, or the Indians themselves gather together on a Sunday, someone mentions the name of Arjun Singh. And, almost invariably, the question arises : Why did he call Jeannie ' Little Flower ' when he had to kill so many lice in her head ?

The Lady and the Pedlar

(To Julian Maclaren Ross)

EVEN as Topsy caught the handle of the door of that compartment she regretted it, for she had seen the strange hulk of Shiv Singh's turban over the bulk of his form in the corner. But she had been in such a hurry. And she felt foolish to be frightened. So she braved it and entered, her attaché case in front of her.

Shiv Singh who sat huddled in his overcoat raised his eyes towards her for a moment. Then, conscious from past experience that his stare usually frightened the English ladies and generally drove them away to another compartment, he assumed a casual air and, lowering his bearded face into the folds of his colourful muffler, luxuriated in the warmth of his own breath.

Topsy smoothed her coat under her and sat down in the corner seat by the door, her attaché case by her. She

looked straight before her and tried to calm herself, as she felt her cheeks burning with the blood that had rushed up to her face through hurrying up the platform and the confusion of seeing a foreigner in the compartment which she had entered. There were the tiniest beads of perspiration on the tip of her well-shaped nose and the smooth skin of her almost masculine face. She breathed deeply for a moment, looked vigilantly at the stranger from the corner of her eyes and then opened her bag to get a cigarette.

As she lit the fag and exhaled a mouthful of smoke in an effort to calm her nerves, Shiv Singh turned and stared at her. His gaze was half full of wonder at her beauty, which was like that of a wax image in a hair-dresser's shop and at the same time possessed the strange armour-like hardness of steel, and half disapproving because of the instinctive taboo of the Sikh in him against tobacco fumes.

She felt her heart thudding with danger as she sensed that he was looking at her. She would have got up and cleared out to another compartment but there was a whistle and the train began to move. Then, ashamed of her panic, she tried to settle down and shake off the queer glistening fibre of dread that shimmered before her eyes, to cool the thick diaphanous stream of blood that turned to sweat under her armpits, to jam the echoes of memories that struck her spine between the shoulder blades and formed a vague, spheroidal ball of fire in her belly. . .

Now that the rail gari had started there was no danger of her going away out of sheer fright and Shiv Singh felt his pulse beat rise at the warmth of her presence. It always made him happy to be with a pretty girl, specially if she took him for granted and trusted him, and, although in the soft layers under his crustacean brown skin he knew that this one was self-conscious and had no pity for him but only fear, he thought that in a little while she would get

used to his strangeness. In fact he felt he must do something to put her at her ease, for the English never took the initiative in these things—certainly travelling here was not like journeying in Indian trains where everyone told his life-story even before the moving thing had begun to move. So he thought of some way of breaking the ice. For a moment he felt the subtle radiance of dread overwhelm his brain and he could imagine her pulling the chord if he accosted her. Then, beneath the heavy crest of his forehead, the warm sun of his good sense shone forth, infusing into him an assurance which was the reflex of his innocence and lit his Punjabi heart with warmth. During these many years, after the chill of his first arrival, he had gone through the streets and lanes of this country, the towns as well as the most outlying villages and, though aware of the handicap of his black body, in the tang of the sun on his face and the smell of his bushy beard, he had built up a wall of bluff in his strong sinews to protect his child's heart which he could, however, remove at will to release the warmth of his humanity as soon as he came into contact with people. And he had learnt to turn the tap on at the right time through long practice as a pedlar, for you had to make a beginning if you wanted to sell your wares. But how was he to begin now ? . . .

He stared at the girl knowing that the gentle liquid in his eyes would communicate his real intent. But Topsy was staring through the hard points of her grey-green eye balls, straight in front of her, her face cast in a rigid mould, even as it was flushed a vivid pink against the ivory of her neck. She looked like the effigy of death itself. And Shiv Singh was flustered.

Glancing at her attaché case and, fancying it did not give her enough space to sit on comfortably, he said : ' Miss, I put your box on the luggage rack—there ? '

There was the rustling of tussore silk in the curve of his voice where the words were being cut with sharp, high-pitched scissors in his throat.

'No, thank you,' she said turning with a deliberate kindness towards him. Instantly she felt her congealed blood melting into a more copious sweat, though her startled nerves relaxed into ellipses below ellipses of memory and undulated towards the planets behind her breasts and in her belly.

And, for a while, both the passengers settled down, each to each, separate yet inured to the decency of being and letting be.

But it is not long before the process of becoming will come breaking in upon the moments of being.

Glancing with the eye of the professional hawker at her form, the pedlar caught sight of the edge of her pink crepe de chine petticoat, erring beyond the tweed skirt. Glossy and soft it was by the ruddy knees of the lady,—even as the Benares silk of the salwar his wife had worn when she emerged out of the palanquin into the barn of his home in Nurple after his marriage: only it transgressed across the bare inviting legs of this girl like a big rose petal falling from a ripe flower. . . . In the spring-time of bygone days, the orchards of the landlord by the black river had smelt of wild herbs and juicy fruit, and he would be bursting with desire, warm like a swoon and dizzy with the confusion and disorder of life reaching out to unattainable bliss. . . . But now he was getting old, and the stirring of desire in his bones was chilled by the distance from women and the coldness of these northern climes in which he sojourned to make a living. And yet in the dim-lit corners of his soul he felt the expansion of a warm glow to see the erring robe. . . . He wished he hadn't sold out his entire stock of underwear, for then he could have presented the girl a piece of lingerie

just out of the gladness of his heart. . . . He stole another look at the suggestive garment and then sat disturbed, tempestuous.

Retreating from the three dimensional picture of hills and plains in the frame above the seats, retracing the pupils of her eyes inwards from the cigarette smoke which filled the atmosphere now, she could see the colours of the spectrum as she had seen them when she closed her eyes on the terrace of her mother's home in Johannesburg. Nothing else was clear and certain, only the multi-coloured stars of heat, spreading like flowers in a kaleidoscope before her as she followed the negro gardener who watered the hanging plants. And then, suddenly, across the long corridors, there was the echo of a rich voice. That was her mother calling, a fragrant voice but also full of coldness as she knew that she, Topsy, had been following Charlie about, and was reprimanding her with 'Don'ts.' . . . Was it the fiery heat of Africa that made her, even now, break out in deadly sweats? She had been brought away to school in England so long ago that she did not remember much about the big house in Johannesburg where she had been born and bred. And yet in the vegetable-animal kingdom of her nerves she came across the most extraordinary sensations, which her sudden blushes and flushes proclaimed to the world. . . . She had been very fond of Charlie, and her mother was kind to the servants in spite of what she said. Why then did she always get hot and cold whenever she met a coloured man? And why did she feel a faint nausea in her belly every time she came face to face with a man? Why the wild confusion? . . .

The train was running now as if it were racing towards the end of the world, and, outside, the ups and downs of Cheshire hills made a bewitchingly impermanent pattern, like the past dissolving into the thin cold air of winter.

The two passengers waited, after their thoughts had wandered to and fro, to assess each other again, and yet as they surveyed the shadows of each other's presence, they were struck blind by the impenetrability of the barriers which the cluster of memories and desires had put between them.

Someone brushed past the window along the corridor and the fear that the intruder might come into the compartment forced the disturbing clusters in each of them to offer a common response of uneasy taciturnity towards the stranger. But the danger passed and they were lost in their own fancies.

Before long, however, the desire to make contact with the girl began to overpower Shiv Singh, for he was going to alight at the next station and felt he should have liked to prove to her that he was no murderer. Why shouldn't he be able to speak to her? He did not mean any harm. So why not? . . . And the fact that he could not do as he wished became a challenge to him, to his sense of chivalry and manhood. 'Can I dare? Can I?' . . . The question arose from underneath the callow, abject soul that had never been able to overthrow the many fears that the white skin had instilled into him, except when he was openly defiant. . . . And he sought to deceive himself by intoning a Hindustani verse, lamenting the inevitability of separation from the beloved. And, a little later, he was carried beyond the torments of the poetic lover to the cynicism of the frustrated Mejnun and tried to remember another conceit in which he had heard expressed the faithlessness of woman, the hollowness of her heart, the changes and shifts of her manner, the faked smiles, the easy tears and all the other blandishments.

The girl was much more at ease now, though she still pursed her lips tight and averted her empty steel glare to

the window beyond which the landscape was changing. She could not help reacting to the pressure of his will which kept caressing her face through surreptitious glances, and yet she was determined to resist the intrusion of his pathetic, dog-like eyes with the bones of her high cheeks and her strong chin. Never, never to yield, to keep the distance between herself and them—that was the feeling which held her together. ('Give them an inch and they would take a yard my dear!') And, anyhow, it was too late to surrender after her first hesitation at the door, after her persistent refusal to face him, and after he had ('they see right through you, my dear!') stripped her naked with his exploring eyes.

The train passed through a dark tunnel and Topsy's heart nearly sank into the pit of her stomach. But Shiv Singh had not moved and the shadow was brief. And, then, they passed by a graveyard and the backs of some houses and over a bridge, and the pedlar stirred and reached out for his suitcase.

The atmosphere in the compartment eased with his movement. And Topsy even stole a glance at the contemptible creature out of sheer curiosity, as though she was wondering what kind of an ape he was.

Shiv Singh got up and, assembling his belongings, stood looking about him.

Now that she had surveyed his tall athletic form the girl was fascinated by him and stared at him hard and yet constantly.

And the miracle happened which she had tried to avoid: their eyes met for the briefest instant.

Because his eyes had met hers when she was completely unawares and there had been no hatred in her glance but only a faint look of wonder, Shiv Singh was emboldened to establish the connection he had longed for, even though it was only for a moment, before he alighted from the train.

Impulsively he dug his hand into the pocket of his coat and took out an egg.

‘Miss, take this,’ he said offering it to her on his palm. ‘Very rare nowadays.’

The fascination of wonder had in that one instant been overtaken by the compulsion of a faint greed and fainter gratitude.

‘Oh, thank you,’ she said and, smiling, dipped her eyes coyly before him.

Shiv Singh had now turned his back, so overcome was he by his sense of conquest, and so anxious that not the slightest trace of contempt in her eyes should spoil his happiness. And the generous, puffed-up Punjabi in him bore him down the corridor and out to the platform of the station where the train had come to a standstill after the last jerk.

Topsy carefully packed the egg in a paper bag and put it in her attaché case. She marvelled at her own indiscretion in taking a gift from a stranger, a black man, but an egg was an egg these days.

When she got home she boiled the egg, thinking it would be nice to have it for supper. As she took it out of the saucepan, because she saw the shell splitting, she found that it was already a hard-boiled egg, which had now become doubly hard-boiled !

A Village Idyll

(To Cedric Dover)

SPLASHES of red and orange mingle into an aura of burning gold and, in a flash, the sun rises over the rim of the village pond, resplendent.

Gauri comes treading on the pearls of dew on the tufts of grass by the ditch to fetch water, with a pitcher under her arm.

‘ Oh, the fair one.

Oh, ripe like the juice of a sugarcane. . . .’

Govind sighs, as he sits rubbing his clothes with soap on a slab of stone. The glow produced by the brisk movement on his face ripens into crimson and his breath almost fails.

Gauri shyly draws the end of her dupatta over her head and dips her pitcher in the water, but, as she leans forward, the tips of her brave breasts are silhouetted against the skyline.

‘ May I be your sacrifice ! ’ Govind whispers the familiar ejaculation of heart-squanderers in the streets of Verka. And, as though the words are potent like a magic spell, the blood rushes down from his head to his heart and loins, the centres of storm in his peasant soul, ‘ Oh the fair one ! ’ he hisses. And the hisses splutter into an embarrassed cough.

At that Gauri laughs even as her pitcher gurgles with a series of hysterical reverberations.

And with that their love started. For, in the tickling of her throat and the saliva on his tongue was the meeting of

long distances, of uneasy colloquies, of thumping hearts and reckless yearning.

She stood before him, her breasts heaving towards the morning, her senses sinuously touching the edge of demure restraint, her blood warming and melting and leaping like flames towards a ceiling in a conflagration.

He stared at the wonder of her, his body taut, his breath swelling and unswelling to the tune of his now frightened heart, his soul reaching out to some expression from the groin of endless silences. She seemed like some shimmering cloud image, veiled in sheaths of innocence. 'Ha !' . . . the exclamation escaped from his throat involuntarily. And he leapt towards her like a tiger towards a young doe.

With a shrill shriek she ran, leaving her pitcher where it stood at the edge of the pond. And, as she raced up the steep bank, her torso straining forward but her legs far behind, she knew she was defeated and burst into a smile.

Govind caught her and flung her on to a dune. 'She fought him back, digging her nails into him and kicking him with upraised knees. He swung her from side to side and pinned her arms to the earth and lay down on her.

'Oh, let me go,' she said with tears in her eyes and laughter in her mouth. The colour on his face called to the radiance on her cheeks. And, giddy-eyed, she relaxed, till his lips touched hers. And now she swayed as though her soul was in a delirium of giving.

'Some one will see us,' she whispered.

But, storm tossed, scampering, wriggling hard, twitching with the concentration of nerves outstretched for months in desire for her, in a fierce felicity, he was intent on the dissolution of her energies, the melting of the snows of her virginity . . .

A little distance away, on the track leading to the rivulet, Lehna, the son of the Landlord, went twisting the tails of

his bullocks, goading them to drag the manure cart quicker. Govind flapped his arms like a protective male bird covering his mate under his wings for Lehna was his rival. Gauri snuggled up to him like a cooing female bird. And thus they lay in the heat and the sweat, their voices rustling like the silks of Lahore and their faces glowing above the dune sands like two luminous wild flowers jutting out of the earth. The sun shone above their heads.

The sun shines, and the moon takes light from it, as also the stars. And on the earth, going round the sun, through the eternal movements, we possess in our spines all the planets, as well as a thirsty love and the desire to die in order to be reborn . . . And from the dying, and through the rebirth, there grow lotuses among the reeds, the flaming smiling pinks, pushed up in the quagmire by the vital spark that keeps things alive. In the fruits, flowers, foliages, among the birds, beasts and humans, the same glorious urge prospers. And there is creation.

Gauri smiles like the demure morning. Govind laughs like the temple drum. There is the voice of Siva in their curly throats. And in their bodies is the sinuous disunion of a broken moment between the lord of storms and his consort, Parvati. And in their touching is the burning of several planets, the extinction of worlds, the smothering of heavens, the dissolution of hells, and the springing of a serene pleasure, muted like a prayer in which we rest, sometimes as before a new miracle and sometimes, as before the juxtaposition of legs intertwined in a ridiculous posture.

And thus begins a cycle.

Govind met Gauri in the lentil field on the first full moon night of autumn when every one was awake and merry. He lay with her in a hay barn on the eighth day of the new moon before winter, when people were feasting at night after fasting the whole day. And he took her on every

moon-lit night in the winter. For, after the first flush of raw passion had expended itself under the sun, they began more and more to lend themselves to the mellow light of the moon. Govind wore clean clothes and Gauri always had flowers in her hair.

As Gauri went to meet Govind in the fields by the river on one eclipse night, however, her mother saw her. 'Ah!' she shrieked at the boy, 'if you have spoiled my daughter, you must marry her . . . you wretch . . .' And she shrieked at Govind's mother for letting her son roam round like a bull. And Govind's mother shrieked at Govind's father for begetting a seducer. And Govind's father shouted at Govind. To which the boy returned the simple answer : 'Marry me to the girl.'

And then there was much toing and froing among the elders.

And, at last, on an auspicious day, discovered in the scrolls of their fate, for a good commission by Pandit Badri Nath, the Brahmin priest, Govind and Gauri were married . . .

Birth

(To Anais Nin)

THE earth seemed to groan as Parvati heaved away from the busti in the hollow of the hills and her throat tightened in the breathless dark. The kikar trees on the road loomed like Jinns before her eyes, while the tremors in her belly drugged her with a dull pain as sweet as the scent of the

Queen-of-the-Night. Her father-in-law, who had been keeping at a respectable distance from her, was almost lost to view, except that she could hear his short, angry voice, now and then, beckoning her to hurry. And, in order to assure him that she was following, as also to assure herself against the frightening trees, she answered that she was following. But her feet were getting heavier and heavier this morning, while her torso, in spite of the bundle on her head, pushed forward like the prow of a stately ship.

As she had started off in the early hours of the morning from the cluster of huts near Karole Bagh towards Ridge Road, where her husband had already gone to work, road mending, she had felt the child stirring in her belly. Perhaps it was turning over to take another, more comfortable position as he had seemed to be doing all night. And she had put her hand on her belly ever so tenderly, as though to reassure the babe. And she had smiled the slightest wisp of a smile to think of what Ramu had done during the night and throughout the middle months of her pregnancy whenever she told him that the baby was stirring in her : he had put his ears on her stomach and listened and, then, playfully tapping with his fingers, he would intone a crazy, humorous sing-song :

Patience, son, patience,

You must learn to be patient,

You must learn to cultivate the long-breasted sense of
your ancestors . . .

Now as she felt another stirring in her belly she superstitiously thought that it was probably Ramu's tricks which were responsible for the disturbance in her womb. For, not only had her husband been teasing her all the way from Ambala in the train, but he had had her until only a month ago in spurts of wild desire while her father-in-law was asleep in the hut.

She paused for a moment, balanced the bundle of food on her head with her left hand, while she stroked her belly with her right hand. The growing life in her swirled from side to side, so that her heart throbbed violently with fear and her head was dizzy with weakness. She gritted her teeth and clenched her hands to avoid fainting and, mercifully, the griping pain passed. She breathed hard and proceeded on her way.

The feeble echo of her father-in-law's voice fell on her ears : ' Oh hurry ! '

She lifted her voice and answered back : ' I am following, Baba, I am following.'

And, all of a quiver at the momentary passing of pain, she was now anxious for the old man, sorry to be a burden on him who had really broken under the burden of responsibilities, specially when he had had to mortgage his land and buy the fares to Delhi. And yet, throughout, he had been solicitous for her welfare, and that had always moved her. Actually, of course, his concern was more for the son's son that she might bear for him than for her. But, nevertheless, his consideration was more touching because he was so child-like in his anxiety and so warm-hearted, in spite of the bad luck that had been pursuing him like a malevolent spirit all these years. For instance, he had refused to believe her mother-in-law when, lingering on her death-bed, she had maliciously attributed the decline of the whole family to the day when, five years ago, she, Parvati had come to their house as Ramu's wedded wife. No, he had not believed the old woman and had scoffed at her even when the price of his disbelief in his wife's obsession was a protracted sulking on her part which hastened her death from cancer. And she, Parvati, had felt ever since that she must justify the old man's faith in her and give him a grandson, if only as a compensation for the loss of

his wife and as the only happiness that might compensate him for the slow agony of his ruin through the debt and the drought.

Another tremor of pain, and the sickness of bile in the mouth . . .

But she gritted her teeth again and felt that she must hold out if only for the sake of appearances, because, earthy and natural as the old man was, he might be embarrassed if she gave birth to the child on the way to work. She must wait till her husband was near at hand and could fetch a woman from among the other stone-breakers to deliver her.

She hurried along, the tension in her nerves heightening under the layers of heat that oozed from the shadows of the lingering night. And beads of perspiration covered her nose and her forehead, and she felt as if she were choking for lack of breath. But she did not relax her hold on herself and, keeping her belly uplifted before her even as a drummer keeps a drum, her head held high, she strode along majestically forward.

For moments she could see herself walking along, almost as though she were the spectator of her own acts. Perhaps, it was from the nodal point of a strange apathy, which comes on to a pregnant woman, that she could see her soft advance, proud like that of a she-peacock, feeling upon feeling in her body spending itself into a silence which was somewhat like the death from which all life begins. Over her tendons spread the morasses of inertness, from which came the echoes of pain, dull thuds of the sound of her babe stirring, struggling, reaching out through the sheaths of liquid held up by the trauma of birth. And through this pent-up race between the elements in her belly, the vision of the dull whites of her eyes played havoc with the black points, so that each branch of a tree became the intricate coil of serpents from which hung the skulls of donkeys,

stags, lions, elephants, monkeys side by side with the bodies of the damned humans in the orchards of hell.

There was the slightest whirr of fear at the back of her head as this image of an early legend about the trees in hell crept up behind the film of grit in her eyes. The sight of a white-washed grave, with a green flag on top of it, increased the fear and she shook a little. This caused a rumbling in her belly and sent sparks of shooting pain charging the quagmire of her mind, stirring the memories of terror built up through the talk of her mother. She was in the panic of a confusion and began to run, trying to hold her head erect and her torso suspended before her, as though she were guarding both the beauty of her gait as well as her unborn child against the shadows of the trees, against all the grisly populations which confronted her. The films on her startled eyes became thicker in the blind rush forward and her nostrils dilated like that of a young bay mare pursued by the devil. She opened her mouth to shout for her father-in-law, but though her lips were agape no sound came out of them.

And now she tried to control herself, to banish the fear of the haunting shadows by an extroversion of will. And, for a moment, she paused, her breasts heaving, her breath coming and going quickly, and the whole of her body bathed in a sweat. But now a spiral wave of weakness rose to her head and she felt giddy. Through her half-closed eyes, she could see her father-in-law like a speck of dust against the huge boulders of the Birla Temple on Ridge Road, outside which was the pitch where she was to go to break stones. If only she could survive this faint, she could make it and be out of the reach of these graves! . . . The opiate of heat and fatigue was on her numb body now, however, and, while she clenched her hands in readiness to advance, the pain in her abdomen became a growl like the

noisy motion of the wheel on the road-making engine and she receded back into the arms of the doots of hell.

She stamped the earth, as though to beckon it, as Sita had done asking it to open up and swallow her in her hour of peril. The earth did not open up, but she steadied a little. The pain in her belly was swirling in wild waves, round and round, up and down, the aus stirring in the cauldron of her belly, sizzling and boiling over.

Shaking her head in defiance of the demons, both inside and outside her, holding her stomach in her left hand, the corners of her tightly closed mouth twitching in a frenzy of desperation, her face wrinkled, she moved with a deliberate calm towards the hollow ditch which stretched by the road. And, lowering the basket off her head, she fell back with a thud on to the hump of the ditch. Fortunately, she had landed on her yielding bottom.

For a while, she lay back and tried to rest herself, hoping that the spell of pain would pass. But as soon as she closed her eyes she felt the moisture between her loins and knew that her baby had started.

Slow ache of yearning, like the bursting desire for her men, blended with the rich smell of aus, and she felt as though she was in a dragged stupor, involved in a kind of *einui* in which the nerves of her body seemed to relax. Her brows knitted into a frown, the corners of her lips tightened and her eyes contracted, there were pinpoints of sweat on her nose and a scowl on her face. She felt afraid that she might evaporate into nothingness, just pass out, a sagging heap of flesh dissolving under the pressure of the child in her belly.

She wanted to harden her mind so that she could save herself, but the mind is the body and the body mind, so that the will to power over her soul only rigidified her flesh; and she lay in a tense, unbending pose.

In a moment, however, her ego dissolved under the impact of further waves of pain. And now she was gasping for breath, a helpless, grey bird, smothered by the overwhelming forces that rose from her belly, the powerful music of her distended entrails drowning her resistances through a series of involuntary shrieks.

‘Oh god, oh my god!’ she cried out.

And, then, as though the invocation of the Deity had put her in touch with heaven from the drugged stupor of her brain, there arose glimpses of random visions, configurations formed by the specks of cloud on the blue sky. Beyond the haze of delirium in her eyes, there stood the picture of an enormous woman lying down flat. And it seemed to her as though this woman in the clouds was also in the travail of childbirth.

Suppressing her groans, urged by deep curiosity and the superstitious belief that heavenly powers often appear to help human beings in their time of trouble, she stared hard at the hulking form. The image seemed to change and get fixed before her in the shape of the Goddess Kali, recumbent in her benevolent mood by the side of the crouching God, Shiva. And she felt a sudden wave of resentment that her husband was not by her side, seated there, helping her. He had known that she was nearing her time. In fact, he had known it this morning because she had tossed about from side to side restlessly all night. And yet he had rushed off to work, leaving her to bear the pain all alone . . . Oh, if only, only . . . if she could touch a sympathetic hand, or limb,—oh anything, anything, if only she could clutch a straw to help while the excruciating pain gnawed at her entrails and twisted her from hip to hip . . .

But she turned her face away from the clouds in the sky and cursed herself for thinking ill of her husband, the lord and master whom her parents had married her off to and

whom they expected her to worship. And then she thought of the joy she had had when he had come to her on the night that she conceived this child.

Senses emerging from indifference and the fatigue of the day's work like a rich perfume drugging her body into excitement. Aroused vitals urging her strong buttocks against the pressure of his body. Surging of warmth in her belly and under her breasts, even as there was this heat inside her now, melting of mouth to mouth . . . And then the soporific faintness in the head, not unlike the giddiness that possessed her in this childbirth. Sighing, eyes half closed, limbs taut, enraptured at the swirling of his maddening strokes, smothered . . .

She could recall the feelings of those moments with a strange clarity on the curve of her present pleasure and pain, she could sense in the spell of writhings in her haunches the swelling and unswelling of passion. Only, the pain was gradually reducing her to pulp till her eyes were closing against her will and she was shrieking . . .

'Oh mother! Oh my mother!' she cried, panting for breath as though she were suspended between life and death. And, for a moment she lay back exhausted as though she could not go on with it.

Then, with clenched teeth and a deliberate intent to control the spreading panic in her limbs, she raised her head and sat up in a crouching position.

Daggers of shooting pain seemed to plunge into her sides as though each nerve had sharpened into steel. Crushing weight of centuries of anguish seemed to press on her belly. And there was the endless groin-grind of a churning of the oceans inside her, the crushing of worlds over her head and the struggle of random elements, each shooting pain emerging out of the source of energy in her belly into a storm tossed outer universe. Perspiration simply poured down her face

now and blended with the pressure of the elements that dug pinpoints of heat into her flesh.

'Oh, come, come, child come,' she cried out aloud almost like an incantation. 'Come, come, my babe,' she whispered even as she had breathed love words on the night that the seed was sown.

And she hardened her body so that the tenderness in her could be released, whipping her buttocks with her hands, striking the sides of her waist, swaying to and fro, gritting her teeth and hissing till she felt her haunches sagging and her bones twisting, till she could see her frame being pulled by elemental forces which seemed to have come and taken possession of her, the opposite tensions arising from nothingness and swaying like a strange and heavy rhythm of the earth's primitive energies.

With a smile on her face, a grim smile, she held her head in her hands and lay back in the position in which she had first fallen. And, beckoning all the resources of her will, collecting the tension of her nerves in her clenched fists, she strained and heaved in a series of protracted efforts. The heavy smell of an extraordinary drowsiness sustained her as involuntary tears rolled down her cheeks and as she groaned. The twistings and turnings of her waist contorted her body into a strange amorphous shape. And, above the protuberance of her churning stomach, her heart beat like the echo of all the throbbings of previous months . . .

At last after an hour of torment as she lay drenched in a pool of blood and aus, she felt a boundless surging overwhelm her.

And, with a twitch of horror which faded into a mute triumph, the child came with a thin little cry, a dark bundle of tender, wrinkled flesh, a boy breathing softly but tingling with warm life.

Clutching him with eager, deft hands, she performed the

services of the midwife on herself with the cool, assured touch which only the old dai, Kesari, in her native village, was known to bring to her task. And, what was most surprising, even to her, was the fact that having cut the navel strings which united her child to her with the rough end of the silver hansli round her neck, she emptied the basket in which she carried the food, donated the roti to the birds as a gift-offering, put her baby in it and strode forth towards the Ridge to go and break stones.

The darkness of the twilight sky was crumbling and the early morning sun had brightened the sky. But, as Parvati approached the pitch where she worked, the other stone breakers could not recognise her, because she looked different with the basket in her arms rather than on her head as she usually carried it. When, however, she came and laid the whining child at their feet, they were breathless with wonder.

A witch—this Parvati ! ' an old woman said.

To be sure, a demon ! ' a man remarked.

To be sure ! ' added Ramu, her husband coming towards the basket to have a look at his child.

'The Goddess helped me in my travail,' whispered Parvati. 'I saw her in the clouds . . . '

The women left their work and rushed towards her, some open mouthed, some with prayers and incantations on their lips.

'Stop all this cain cain, women ! ' shouted her father-in-law as he came up from where he had been tarring the road to look at his grandchild. 'Get away,' he said with a bluff of rudeness. 'It is no wonder that she had the little one all by herself. She is a peasant woman with strong loins like many other peasant women of our parts, who have given birth to sons all by themselves, so that our race can be perpetuated and our land tilled for

grain . . . ' And he picked up the whining baby from the basket like a practiced hand and put the little shrieking one to his shoulder, saying with a gruff tenderness: ' Come, come, my lion, my stalwart, don't weep . . . come, it won't be so bad. Come, my son, perhaps with your coming, our luck will turn . . . '

